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A case study of the pursuit of organisational excellence:

**The role of 'diagnostic benchmarking' as an enabler of
organisational improvement**

David James Yarrow

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of
Northumbria University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Research completed under the supervision of Newcastle Business School

May 2006

Abstract

The pursuit of “excellence” is a preoccupation for leaders and change agents who wish their organisations to be the best that they can be. “How do we achieve excellence?”, they ask. “Is there a formula, a roadmap?” There is no shortage of offerings: total quality management, business excellence, process redesign, lean thinking... the list seems endless. Advocates of the latest offering trumpet its efficacious properties, sceptics see reinvented wheels, scholars bemoan hype that threatens to discredit worthy methodologies.

Diagnostic benchmarking attempts to bottle organisational excellence and make it accessible and usable for change agents and their colleagues. It presents in various forms, from Ishikawa’s quality diagnostic to the Baldrige Framework, the EFQM Excellence Model, the PROBE tools and many others. It offers a means of checking the organisation’s health and identifying actions that will help it to progress on its journey towards excellence.

This study has subjected diagnostic benchmarking to intensive scrutiny to better understand its role as an enabler of organisational improvement, thus addressing an important gap in the body of knowledge. It has deployed an inductive methodology in the case study setting of an English local authority, which has committed energy and resources to diagnostic benchmarking and has been officially designated as an “Excellent Council”. Through the eyes and interpretations of those who are engaged in its deployment, the role of diagnostic benchmarking is revealed to be less formula or roadmap, more stimulus and aid to reflection and learning. Its meaning for participants ranges from *“a gold bar that others won’t share”* to *“a waste of time when I might have been doing my job”*. The study concludes that diagnostic benchmarking has played a role as an enabler in this particular setting, and suggests contingent factors that may have worked for and against its effectiveness in that role.

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Notes on formatting and referencing style

As recommended during the Newcastle Business School “Introduction to Research” study unit, all referencing in this PhD thesis follows the American Psychological Association (APA) Format, as per the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (5th Edition), of which extracts are available at <http://www.apastyle.org>

One noteworthy feature of this format is that quotations in the text of fewer than 40 words are “enclosed within double quotation marks”. Longer quotations are treated as follows:

Place quotations longer than 40 words in a free-standing block of typewritten lines, and omit quotation marks. Start the quotation on a new line, indented five spaces from the left margin. Type the entire quotation on the new margin, and indent the first line of any subsequent paragraph within the quotation five spaces from the new margin. Maintain double-spacing throughout. The parenthetical citation should come after the closing punctuation mark.

(Neyhart & Karper, 2001)

Another feature is the use of “*et al.*” The APA guidance is:

If a work has three, four, or five authors, cite all of the authors the first time you refer to the work in your text. The next time you refer to the work, shorten the citation to the last name of the first author plus the words *et al.* Join the authors’ names with the word and if you are referring to them in the text; join the authors’ names with an ampersand (&) if you are referring to them in a parenthetical citation... If a work has six authors (or more), cite only the last name of the first author plus the words *et al.*

I have chosen to use 1.5 line spacing rather than double-spacing throughout this document, in the belief that this makes the document reader-friendly without becoming unnecessarily bulky.

Where my own (the author’s) words are quoted as part of an extract from an interview transcript, *they are shown in italics to distinguish them from* the words of research participants.

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I could not have completed this PhD research without the generous cooperation of the pilot study and case study organisations and the individual research participants who gave their time and thoughts so willingly. By agreement, they remain anonymous, but I owe them a debt of gratitude. My supervisors Paul Lee, Tricia Bryans and Mohamed Zairi have provided invaluable support. Their contributions have been many and various, but I would highlight Paul's endless patience and process expertise which kept me and the research on track; Tricia's ability to nurture my confidence and skill in applying a methodology that was unfamiliar territory for me; and Mohamed's vision and sense of purpose which were an inspiration to me long before I began the PhD process and will remain so beyond it.

Over the last 15 years, I have been privileged to work with some leading lights in the field of "quality" and "benchmarking", and with many valued colleagues who have taught me much as we have pursued shared enthusiasms. They have shaped my learning and helped me to pinpoint and address the questions that form the focus of this research. Thanks for contributions made knowingly or unknowingly by Mandy Allen, Alex Appleby, John Armstrong, Dave Ashton, Ceridwyn Bessant, Kate Blackmon, Jim Bradley, Jon Bradshaw, Pete Caldwell, Nick Capon, Richard Clayton, Christine Cnossen, Dave Collins, Maxine Conner, Sam Coe, Jeremy Cook, Barrie Craven, Barrie Dale, Peter Faill, Jo Flood, Sarah Fraser, Tom Friedewald, Mike Gregory, Phil Hanson, Graham Hart, Eddie Jones, Richard Keegan, Matthew Lumsden, Janice McMillan, Kate Macnaught, Stuart Macpherson, Liz Matykiewicz, Sharon Mavin, Ed Mitchell, Gerry Oates, James O'Kane, Kevin Ord, Jane Owen, Gary Owens, Jon Pemberton, Graham Pike, Terry Pilcher, Vas Prabhu, Dave Procter, Angie Rae, Andy Scott, Ian Shell, Ian Stone, George Stonehouse, David Stewart-David, Fran Toller, Frances Wilson, Mindy Wilson, Andy Robson, Martyna Sliwa, Clive Spencer, Jeff Taylor, Steve Unwin, Nigel van Zwanenberg, Chris Voss, Larry Wilkinson.

Above all, I would like to thank my family, and especially my wife Diane and daughters Hayley and Paula, for their constant encouragement, patience and indulgence. They've earned this PhD every bit as much as I have.

Declaration of original authorship

This thesis is my original work. I am solely responsible for its preparation and for conducting the research that supports it, and therefore also for any errors that it may contain. It has not been submitted for any other award or published in any other form. As part of my programme of research, I have completed training needs analyses and fulfilled the specified training requirements in accordance with the University's regulations and guidance.

Name: David James Yarrow

Signature:

Date: 16th November 2006

Chapter 1 Introduction

The drive to improve services and products, and to achieve “excellence” in the organisations that deliver them, is relentless and permeates every walk of life. Companies, educational establishments, public services, local authorities, government departments and agencies, retailers, food producers; all are encouraged, cajoled, required - sometimes inspired - to pursue the goal of achieving “excellence” in what they deliver and how they deliver it. They are bombarded with information, articles and marketing material about the various approaches, solutions, tools and techniques that will enable them to achieve this elusive goal. Some of these solutions promise the earth, some emphasise how difficult it will be, some will apparently only work if their inventors are hired to assist with their deployment; most, perhaps all, have a price-tag attached, whether explicit, implicit or both.

One of the approaches which purports to assist organisations on their journey towards excellence is “benchmarking”. More accurately, benchmarking is not one approach, it is a blanket term that encompasses a cluster of approaches and techniques, all featuring some kind of comparison between aspects of an organisation and a blueprint or model of excellence, often expressed in terms of how well exemplar organisations perform, and how strong their practices and processes are in order to deliver such good performance.

One particular variant of benchmarking focuses on assisting organisations to undergo a “healthcheck” of their own practices and performance, with the intention of identifying strengths and opportunities for improvement, and generating ideas about how such improvement could be achieved. This technique is often referred to as “diagnostic benchmarking”¹. Its development and deployment have been a major focus of my working life for most of the last decade, and this involvement has led me to be simultaneously enthusiastic about the technique and its potential benefits, sceptical about whether its potential is fulfilled as often as it could be, and intrigued to understand more about how

¹ “Diagnostic benchmarking” is a close relative of the types of “self-assessment” (or, for that matter, externally-facilitated assessment) that organisations undertake based upon a model of “business excellence”. Arguably, these are variants of the same technique. For brevity and simplicity, I will treat such assessments as a subset of “diagnostic benchmarking” for the purposes of this thesis, although the details of the variants will be discussed at various points in the document.

diagnostic benchmarking operates and what role, if any, it plays in organisations' progress along their journeys to excellence.

Hence, when I registered onto Northumbria University's part-time PhD programme in May 1999, it was with the intention of researching into the role that diagnostic benchmarking might play in organisational improvement. The seven-year journey from that day to this has been eventful, fascinating, demanding, at times frustrating but ultimately fulfilling and, I believe, fruitful in terms of the outcomes of the research and the contribution to knowledge that I have been able to make. Like most research programmes, this one has been something of a labour of love, and something of an endurance test - both for me and for others who are close to me. The PhD programme has certainly fulfilled one aim in that I have learned a huge amount along the way - far more than I could have imagined. A former colleague, Larry Wilkinson, ran some research training sessions that I attended early in the process, and asserted that, "By the time you complete this process, you will never be the same again." He was right.

In this introductory chapter I will set out the context of the research, and define my research aim. I will describe and briefly review the relevant body of knowledge, identifying the gaps that I perceive in that knowledge and the particular gap I intend to fill. I will set the scene with respect to some variants on the theme of diagnostic benchmarking, which is intended (and claimed) to contribute to organisational improvement. The paucity of meaningful evidence regarding how this approach operates in practice, its impact and its role (if any) as an enabler of organisational improvement will also be flagged. I will outline the strategy adopted in reviewing the relevant literature; describe the "supporting studies" which assisted me; and introduce at broad-brush level the research methodology and strategy that I have deployed in order to collect and interpret primary research data. This chapter will finish with a "route map" for the rest of the document.

Context, rationale and aims of the research

Eight of the last ten years of my professional life have been largely dedicated to contributing to the development and deployment of “diagnostic benchmarking”, exploring *strengths* and *opportunities for improvement* in large numbers of organisations, and identifying changes they might make to achieve improved performance. This form of benchmarking is popular with organisations in many countries and sectors, and with policy makers and change agencies seeking to influence the behaviours and performance of communities of organisations. I have had the opportunity to work on some innovative developments in this field, and with people who are at its leading edge. In this sense, I have been “in the right place at the right time” to gain an in-depth understanding of these important techniques and, being a person of enquiring mind, to increasingly question the extent to which their design, deployment and perceived impact are “evidence-based”.

This experience has enabled me to observe how diagnostic benchmarking can ostensibly be a helpful technique for organisations seeking to improve their performance, but also to question whether the potential benefits are always realised or well-understood. I have realised that my understanding of the efficacy of diagnostic benchmarking has been based primarily on anecdote and assertion, rather than on reliable “evidence”. I have observed how practitioners (advisers, consultants, academics) encourage organisations to deploy diagnostic benchmarking, without, in my view, being able to thoroughly understand and explain how it works, or to rigorously demonstrate its efficacy – at least, not to my satisfaction.

My frustration with this situation inspired me to focus my PhD research on an exploration of the role of diagnostic benchmarking as an enabler of organisational improvement.

Diagnostic benchmarking is an “organisational healthcheck”. In essence, it is a simple technique, designed to measure the extent to which an organisation deploys “best practice” and achieves “best in class performance”, and to compare this state of play with those of other, “comparable” organisations². The intended outcome is an improvement action plan and its implementation. A by-product (from the organisation’s point of view) is that their data is added to a database, becoming part of the “benchmarks” for future participants, and part of aggregate research outputs which are of interest, for example, to policy-makers, scholars and students of national and regional economics.

Diagnostic benchmarking has become something of a preoccupation for many in the world of organisational improvement, business support and academia. Many tools and interventions have been developed³ which purport to help managers and their organisations to progress towards “best practices”, including diagnostic assessment and benchmarking tools, generally based on a model of “total quality management” or “business excellence”. Their use is heavily promoted and has been taken up by a range of organisations⁴, presumably in the belief that their adoption will contribute to an improvement in performance.

² Proponents argue that benchmarking is not necessarily just about comparisons with competitors. Valid comparisons can be made with a broader “peer group”, perhaps crossing sectoral boundaries, and potentially valuable learning opportunities can thereby be identified and pursued.

³ Matykiewicz (2001), for example, identified 39 such tools available in the U.K., and categorised them into various types.

⁴ The leading benchmarking schemes in terms of popularity and profile are the Benchmark Index (managed by the UK Department of Trade and Industry) and PROBE (managed by the PROBE Partnership). Some 8,000 benchmarks have been carried out worldwide through the Benchmark Index (Kennedy & Pilcher, 2003), and some 5,000 through the PROBE benchmarking tools (unpublished data from PROBE Partnership, 2003). In addition, “thousands” (Porter & Tanner, 2004) use the EFQM Excellence Model, and variants thereof such as “beta”, for similar purposes.

The overall aim of the research programme, then, is

***to explore the role of “diagnostic benchmarking”
as an enabler of organisational improvement.***

In pursuit of this overall aim, a number of subsidiary questions are being addressed:

- ❑ In deploying diagnostic benchmarking, what are the objectives and expectations of the various stakeholders?
- ❑ To what extent are these objectives achieved, and expectations fulfilled?
- ❑ Given the explicit claims of the proponents of diagnostic benchmarking that it is an enabler of organisational improvement, how would such improvement be expected to manifest itself?
- ❑ Does organisational improvement occur in organisations which deploy diagnostic benchmarking?

From the outset I decided to address these questions primarily through the eyes of the participants and other stakeholders in the benchmarking process. Their views and perceptions would be the first port of call in judging what had occurred, albeit that these perceptions would be questioned as part of the on-going research process. Thus, I planned to adopt an inductive methodology, on the basis that this would be the most suitable way to address an area in which little research had been done, where the experiences, perceptions and interpretations of the participants were of paramount importance to the outcomes; and that such an approach was consistent with my personal worldview, which aligns with social constructionism. The research strategy has been centred on a single case study organisation which, as I began the primary research, had participated in diagnostic benchmarking and planned to do so again within the timescale of my data collection.

Diagnostic benchmarking in context

Diagnostic benchmarking assists managers and employees to review the practices that their organisation deploys, and the results it achieves, identifying potential improvements (Keegan, 1998; Yarrow, Appleby, & Allen, 1999; Matykiewicz, 2001). It is rooted in the *business excellence* domain of knowledge, a term which is commonly linked to the EFQM Excellence Model⁵.

Business excellence is topical in business and not-for-profit circles. It receives governmental and neo-governmental endorsement, as evidenced by a number of “official” websites in the UK and overseas (for example DTI, 2006; I&DeA, 2006), reports by Governmental and related bodies (for example DTI & CBI, 1994; Knuckey *et al.*, 2002) and outputs from benchmarking and award schemes (for example Neely & Adams, 2002; Business Link, 2003). The “Quality Movement” has suffered from a surfeit of rhetoric, acronyms and competing products and brands, and a paucity of evidence of beneficial outcomes (see for example de Burgundy, 1996; Burnes, 1998; Collins, 2000). However, this is changing, with much recent and current focus on the impact of business excellence on organisational performance. A number of studies suggest that business excellence can result in improved performance (for example Oakland, 1998; Easton & Jarrell, 1998; Hendricks & Singhal, 2002). While the rigour of some of this research has been questioned (Easton & Jarrell, 1999, p. 66), the evidence in favour of business excellence⁶ is growing in quantity and rigour.

⁵ The European Foundation for Quality Management created the “EFQM Model for Total Quality Management” in the late 1980s. The model has since been revised several times and renamed as, firstly, “the EFQM Business Excellence Model” and then, during 2000, “the EFQM Excellence Model”. Its forerunners and contemporaries include the Japan-based “Deming Prize” framework and the USA-based “Baldrige Award Criteria Framework.” The EFQM Excellence Model is widely used and accepted as the definitive model of organisational excellence. For example, at the regular World Congresses for TQM (for example the Congresses I attended in Sheffield in 2000, and in Dubai in 2003) many of the keynote speeches and contributed papers refer to this model and assume it to be the definitive “standard”.

⁶ For brevity and simplicity, “business excellence” is taken here to be synonymous with “total quality management” and other general “labels” which might be taken to encompass the state of the art in the field.

Some commentators suggest that business excellence is fundamentally changing the nature of management. Mogab and Cole (1999) conclude that “[TQM] is neither a fad nor a panacea... a new paradigm whose strengths and weaknesses we are only beginning to understand.” (p. 383). Others are less convinced, challenging the efficacy of or necessity for TQM, or reporting disappointing results (for example Powell, 1995; Edwards, 2000).

The quality-focused academic community has devoted considerable attention to benchmarking, emphasising case studies and models. Simpson and Kondouli (2000) present three case studies featuring self-assessment and process benchmarking, concluding that benchmarking is a highly effective technique for improving performance. Dervitsiotis (2000) broadly concurs, but warns of benchmarking’s limitations. The literature on “benchmarking” is voluminous and somewhat confusing, describing a plethora of approaches and taxonomies. Friedewald’s (2001) critical review concludes that most literature is aimed at practitioners, with limited evidence of research methodology. Dattakumar and Jagadeesh’s (2003) review is less critical, identifying a proliferation of literature on the topic and suggesting issues for further research, but not highlighting either the paucity of literature on diagnostic benchmarking and self-assessment, or the lack of rigour or depth in much of what has been published to date.

One could argue that “diagnostic benchmarking” is a variant of the fairly popular processes of “assessment”, perhaps particularly “self-assessment”, which are based upon one or other of the “models of excellence” (such as the EFQM Excellence Model or the Baldrige Framework). I argue that these approaches are so similar that in effect they are different names for the same activity; the distinction, if there is one, might be that during “benchmarking” per se the organisation compares its practices and performance not only with a model of excellence, but also with the extent to which others achieve the standards set by that model. In the context of this research, any such distinction is a detail that will not be allowed to prevent the research from encompassing the full range of variants of this type of assessment (or benchmark); so my intention in using the term “diagnostic benchmarking” is to encompass the full range of “diagnostic” “benchmarking tools” and approaches, including those that might commonly be regarded as “business excellence model-based assessments.”

Self-assessment using models of this nature dates back to the birth of Japan's Deming Prize in the 1950s (Porter & Tanner, 2004, p. 184). Its broader popularity awaited America (the Baldrige Framework) and Europe (the EFQM Model) introducing models of excellence, in 1987 and 1989 respectively. These models are the basis of annual award processes (regional, national and international), and are also widely used by organisations for self-assessment. Porter and Tanner (2004, p. 9) report that "Thousands of organisations across the world now use self-assessment on a regular basis. Self-assessment is not only a means of measuring continuous improvement, it also provides an excellent opportunity for integrating business or organizational excellence into normal business activity."

Diagnostic benchmarking manifests itself in the U.K. in the form of the EFQM Excellence Model, in its various guises, and in a number of commercial/neo-commercial schemes, most notably:

- ❑ The Benchmark Index (developed by the DTI, promoted UK-wide through the 'Business Link' network)
- ❑ beta (developed by the UK Excellence Federation)
- ❑ The PROBE suite of tools (developed by London Business School, IBM Consulting and Northumbria University, promoted internationally by the CBI and the PROBE Partnership)

Participating organisations devote substantial resources to diagnostic benchmarking. Anecdotal evidence and satisfaction surveys suggest that the teams involved almost invariably perceive that the exercise has been beneficial, but evidence of lasting benefits is limited.

One of benchmarking's leading advocates, Camp (1995, p. 15), describes it as "...the search for and implementation of best practices." Its purpose is "...to break the paradigm of not being able to learn from others." (p. 14). Another, Zairi (1998), argues that benchmarking is more than a tool, since:

... the impact of its application is more for changing attitudes and behaviours and raising commitment through better education, awareness and inspiration from model companies. Benchmarking is perhaps the best means for servicing the human asset by continuously supplying new ideas to sustain superior performance levels. (Zairi, 1998, p. 44)

Benchmarking, then, could be a vehicle for, or stimulator of, organisational learning. However, published work about diagnostic benchmarking is limited almost entirely to descriptive accounts and results drawn from analysis of aggregate findings (for example Hanson, Voss, Blackmon, & Oak, 1994; Neely, Szwejczewski, & Smith, 2000; Knuckey *et al.*, 2002; Owen, Robson, Yarrow, & Appleby, 2003). In terms of the findings and conclusions they have delivered, such outputs are generally regarded as credible and have been influential - for example, the "Made in" series of reports (Hanson *et al.*, 1994; Hanson, Voss, Blackmon, & Claxton, 1996) led to the authors being consulted by a Government "Select Committee" on competitiveness, and their findings influenced the content of the first UK Government Competitiveness White Paper (DTI, 1998). These various reports that have arisen from diagnostic benchmarking activity have clearly had the potential to influence policy and strategy at national and sectoral levels, and may well have done so. However, they have done little to explore the issue of whether and how the act of engaging in diagnostic benchmarking has enabled the many individual organisations which have participated to make progress on their own improvement journeys.

There is clearly a significant gap in the literature relating to the issues of how diagnostic benchmarking might operate as an enabler of organisational improvement, and the drivers of its efficacy in playing such a role. This is an important issue, hence the successful completion of my PhD research will represent a valuable contribution to knowledge.

Purpose and design of the literature review

In the previous section, I have briefly introduced the subject of “diagnostic benchmarking”, and placed my research in the context of the current “state of the art” in this field. My PhD research has been underpinned by a thorough literature review which has sought to assemble and critique theory and evidence from the field of “benchmarking” in general and “diagnostic benchmarking” in particular; and to place this focal point of the research within a framework of relevant, related domains of knowledge.

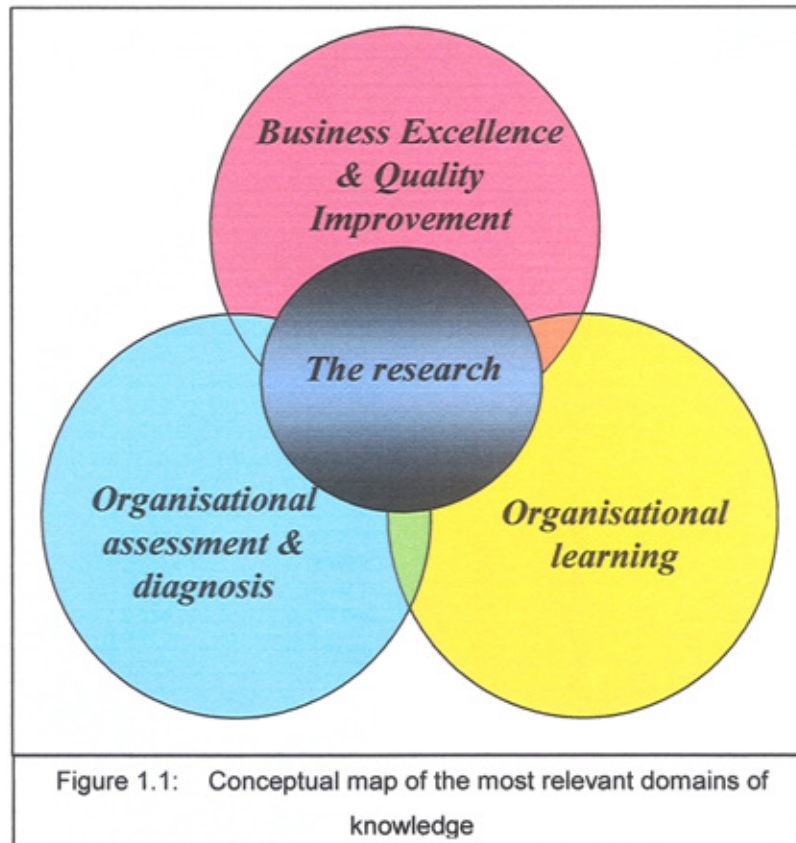
Bell (1993, pp. 35-51) suggests that a critical review of the literature should “show that the writer has studied existing work in the field with insight... [and] provide the reader with a picture... of the state of knowledge and of major questions in the subject area being investigated.” Bell cites Haywood and Wragg (1982, p. 2) who “comment wryly that critical reviews are more often than not uncritical reviews...” resembling furniture catalogues in which every piece of published work merits a one-paragraph entry no matter how skillfully it has been conducted. Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (2002, pp. 159-169) describe reviewing the literature as “a research activity all in itself”, and provide practical advice about how to conduct searches, catalogue sources and make sense of their content. However none of these authors (or any others I have discovered) provides much useful advice about the aspect of literature review that I have found the most challenging: how to decide on the appropriate scope of the literature to review.

Another former colleague, Professor Heather Hopfl, commented during an annual School Research Conference that I attended that once a PhD student has constructed a clear picture of the focus of their research, they will find that almost everything they read, and indeed many news stories and ideas they come across in everyday life, begins to seem relevant to their research - another gem of wisdom from a colleague that has resonated with my own experience. I have searched for, gathered and read material across a broad scope of topics that might have some bearing on the role of diagnostic benchmarking as an enabler of organisational improvement, and have attempted to focus my “formal” literature review into the most relevant domains of knowledge which will provide the optimum support to

my research, and to which I can make the most worthwhile contribution. My approach to reviewing the literature can be summarised as follows:

1. Reviewing the literature specific to benchmarking and related organisational assessments and establishing that, while there is extensive coverage of the findings generated, and of “how to” undertake benchmarking; there is a gap relating to how (indeed, whether) diagnostic benchmarking actually works; to its effectiveness; and to the factors that might determine how and how well it might work in a particular set of circumstances.
2. Extending my searches, reading and review to explore the context of diagnostic benchmarking, rooted in the field of quality improvement and business excellence, establishing the current state of this knowledge domain, and the contemporary issues.
3. Linking, so far as practicable, to related fields which offer the greatest potential for new insights into the effectiveness of diagnostic benchmarking, but have not featured strongly in research and literature in this area.

In extending the coverage to “related fields”, the aim is to ensure that I am (and the research is) better “sensitised” to the potential contributions and insights that might be available, while bearing in mind that there are limits to the scope that any research project, and any researcher, can and should attempt to encompass. I have conceptualised (Figure 1.1) a number of “domains” of knowledge and literature that are of specific interest and relevance.



Each of these domains is in itself extensive and complex, and an attempt to master and review all of them comprehensively might be unrealistic. The focus of my research lies at their intersection. Figure 1.2 illustrates a number of other domains of knowledge that are potentially relevant, but that I have treated as useful background but peripheral to the research. An important task has been the process of making rational decisions regarding themes to pursue and others to understand and acknowledge but leave for another time or another researcher. The guiding principle has been the test of direct relevance to the core purpose of the research project.

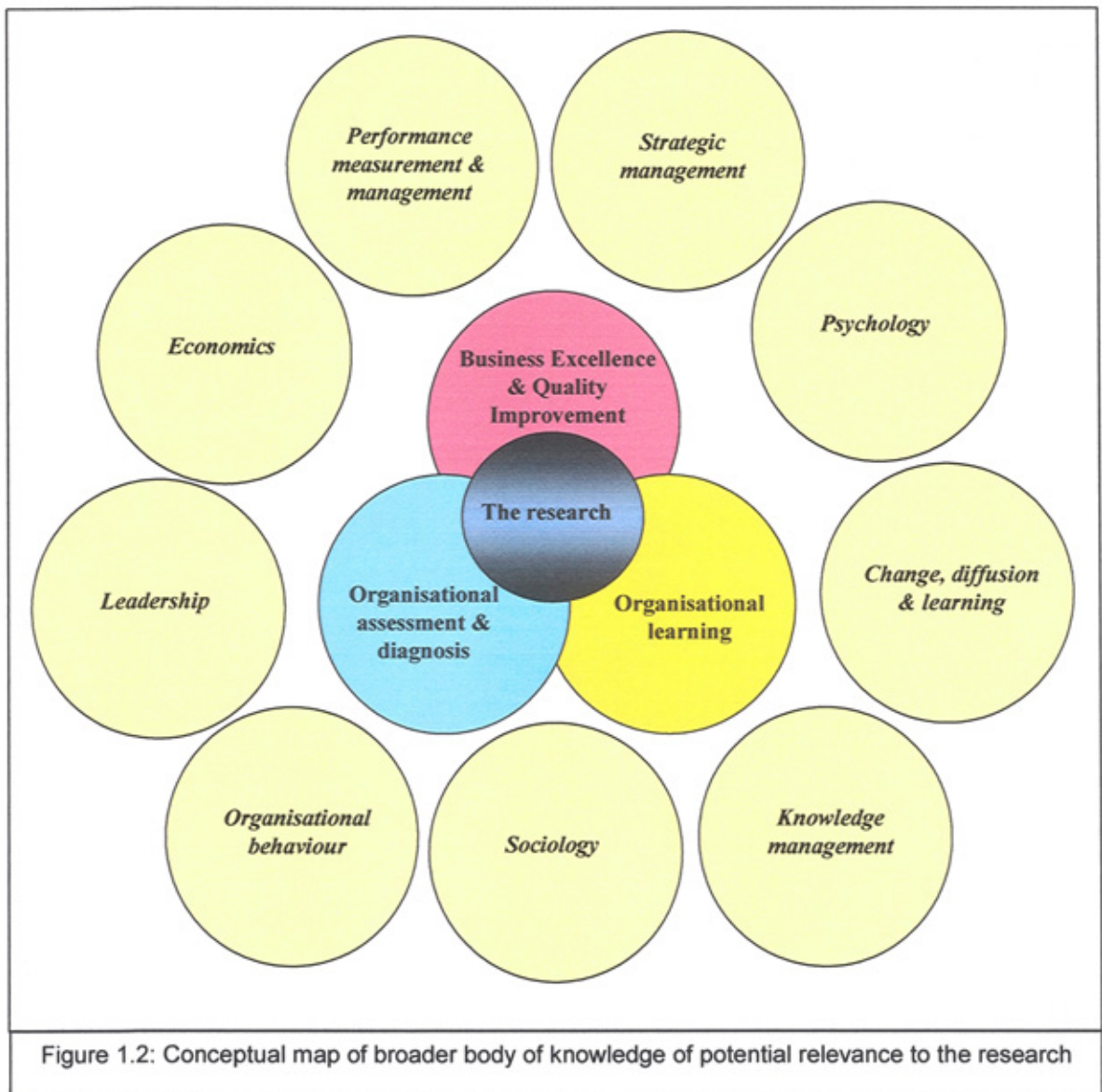


Figure 1.2: Conceptual map of broader body of knowledge of potential relevance to the research

Programme of supporting studies

As an important element of my PhD studies, a substantial programme of supporting studies was completed, this being particularly helpful in developing my understanding of research philosophy and methodology. This was supplemented with extensive literature review on the same topics. My supporting studies have covered (1) research methodology and methods and (2) a variety of learning events focused on subject matter relevant to the PhD. These are detailed in Appendix A, and feature:

- ❑ 3 units from the Northumbria University MSc in Social Research (1999/2000):
 - ❖ Qualitative methods
 - ❖ Quantitative methods
 - ❖ Research philosophies and issues
- ❑ completion of the Newcastle Business School (NBS) prototype “Introduction to research” unit (2000/2001)
- ❑ numerous workshops on various aspects of research, offered by NBS and Northumbria/Newcastle Universities, including some sessions of the NBS Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA)
- ❑ attendance at/delivery of numerous learning events featuring subject matter relevant to my PhD.

Consideration and selection of research methodology and research design

I carefully considered the available options in terms of research methodology and design of an appropriate strategy. Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002, p.57) assert that “The worldview held by an individual researcher [is] an important factor which affects the choice of research methods”. The process of reflecting upon my own “worldview” has been a fascinating aspect of this PhD programme, facilitated by my supporting studies and supervisory team, and has influenced the research programme itself.

I have concluded that my worldview aligns with social constructionism, and this has influenced me to focus on an aspect of diagnostic benchmarking that requires an inductive research methodology, collecting and interpreting mainly qualitative primary data. I believe that such an approach is fit for the purpose of achieving a breakthrough in understanding about how diagnostic benchmarking operates, the benefits that it might be capable of delivering, and of the factors that might influence whether the potential benefits are achieved in a given set of circumstances.

Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 19) describe “valid reasons for doing qualitative research”, including “... the conviction of the researcher based upon research experience [and] to uncover and understand any phenomenon about which little is yet known [and] to gain novel and fresh slants on things about which quite a bit is already known.” In my view, this summed up the current state of knowledge about diagnostic benchmarking at the time when I was designing my research strategy – we apparently knew quite a lot about the technique and its effects, but in fact knew very little about *how* (and, perhaps, *whether*, or at least *how well*) it really worked. A fresh “slant” was needed.

My chosen approach has been to focus on a single case study, exploring it in substantial depth to obtain insights into why and how the chosen organisation had made/was making use of diagnostic benchmarking; what occurred when they did; with what consequences; and with what meanings for the people involved. This focus has embodied my commitment to obtaining a real depth of data, analysis and understanding of the phenomena surrounding

diagnostic benchmarking. The alternative of gathering “shallower” data from a larger number of benchmarking participants would have constrained my ability to derive and synthesise a new contribution to knowledge in the field.

In adopting this approach, my principal aim has been to achieve in-depth insights, and I have been content to trade generalisability in order to achieve this. Yin (2003) explains that a single case might represent an *extreme* case or a *unique* case, and that “...the case study, like the experiment, does not represent a ‘sample’, and in doing a case study, your goal will be to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization).” (p. 10).

Similarly, Stake (2000) emphasises designing the study to optimise understanding of the case rather than generalisation beyond, and describes “intrinsic” casework: “My emphasis is on learning the most about both the individual case and the phenomenon, especially the latter if the special circumstances may yield unusual insight into an issue.” (p. 450).

Some specific challenges have presented themselves as I have developed the detail of the research strategy and proceeded to implement it. A key challenge has been the need to demonstrate rigour in the research. Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002, p. 53) highlight “...an underlying anxiety amongst researchers of all persuasions that the research will not stand up to outside scrutiny”, and introduce the terms “validity”, “reliability” and “generalizability” as technical language for examining this problem. They point out that the language and ideas of validity and reliability were initially developed in quantitative social science, and suggest that the meaning of these terms can vary depending upon the philosophical viewpoint adopted.

Symon and Cassell (1998) point out that most qualitative researchers wish to find some way of justifying their interpretations of their data, and some have developed alternative criteria which are better suited to assessing the “rigour” of qualitative research. They highlight Guba and Lincoln’s (1989) “authenticity criteria” as the best known of these:

These authenticity criteria are explicitly formulated to reflect the concerns of alternative paradigms:

1. resonance (the extent to which the research process reflects the underlying paradigm);
 2. rhetoric (the strength of the presenting argument);
 3. empowerment (the extent to which the findings enable readers to take action);
 4. applicability (the extent to which readers can apply the findings to their own contexts)
- (Symon & Cassell, 1998, p. 7)

Nason and Golding (1998, p. 241) describe the recognition of the reflexivity of the researcher as central to good ethnographic accounts, suggesting that the researcher cannot be a “fly on the wall” because they themselves are part of the research process.

The stance I have adopted is that as the researcher I could not make myself somehow invisible and value-free, and instead have sought to understand and explore the effect that my presence was having on the research and the respondents, and to be open and reflexive on this issue. I have sought to understand how my own philosophical and epistemological positions affect the research, and the effects of my prior knowledge and ways of sense-making, and to provide an account and analysis of these issues as part of the way I report the research.

My decision to explicitly adopt this stance was a defining moment in the PhD process, and indeed in my development as a researcher and practitioner. My instinct about the kind of research that would achieve my aims was now informed by the learning I had acquired through supporting studies, literature review and consultation with my supervisors and other colleagues; and the synthesis of these various ingredients had brought me to a place

from which I could confidently articulate my world view, my epistemological stance and my chosen research strategy. I felt that I had “found my voice” as a researcher, and it was apparent to me that this voice needed to be woven through the research clearly and unashamedly, not somehow hidden “behind the scenes” in an attempt at some kind of anesthetic objectivity. Hence my decision to write this thesis in the first-person, as an autobiographical account of the inseparable journeys of the researcher and his (my) research. As some authors have pointed out (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 636), writing in the first-person does not come easily to one who has been trained to write in quite different, more “formal” and “impersonal” styles. However, in my view, my decision to write in this way was a sound decision, which has been quite liberating, is consistent with the epistemological and methodological framework within which I am working, and has enhanced my ability to achieve the aim of my research.

Having designed a research strategy that would focus on a single case study organisation, I proceeded to define a set of criteria for selecting a suitable organisation: featuring a commitment (at the beginning of my research engagement with the organisation) to deploy diagnostic benchmarking in the near future; preferably a history of having also done so in the past; and a willingness to grant me full access to a range of stakeholders in this work so that I could learn from their experiences and perceptions. A pilot study in a Further Education College that was deploying a diagnostic benchmarking tool for the second time helped me to refine these criteria, and to complete the detailed design of my research methods, and I then proceeded to negotiate full access to a suitable case study organisation. I did not attempt to select a case which would be in some way “representative” of a broader population, but instead targeted what Yin (2003, pp. 39-40) calls an “extreme” case; an organisation which had made more use than most of diagnostic benchmarking, thus offering better opportunities for insights into the technique’s role.

After some initial difficulties, I managed to negotiate access to a local authority (a “council”) which met all of the essential and desirable criteria, and which has been the focus of my primary research collection data over a period of a little more than two years. At the time when I approached them (late 2003), “Organisation C” had been using the Excellence Model (one variant of “diagnostic benchmarking”) in various ways for several

years, and had used a PROBE diagnostic benchmarking tool (another variant) on 6 occasions. The organisation had plans to deploy these tools again in the near future, and were willing to provide me with access to the relevant data and people so that I could thoroughly explore their recent and forthcoming experiences of deploying diagnostic benchmarking, and the role that it might be playing in this organisation's ongoing improvement.

My research design has involved gathering large quantities of primary data within Organisation C, drawing upon: the perceptions of the benchmarking participants (typically, diagnostic benchmarking involves a team of 8 to 10 people, representing a "diagonal slice" through the organisation); the perceptions of other stakeholders in the process (such as senior management and colleagues of the participants, and some external stakeholders of the organisation); contextual data regarding the organisation and the benchmarking process; observations/perceptions of those who facilitate/support the benchmarking process, from within and without the organisation; and my own observations of the organisation and of the benchmarking process. Between November 2003 and January 2006, I conducted 23 lengthy audio-recorded interviews with 14 research participants; I estimate that these interviews lasted for a total of approximately 35 hours, and generated transcripts containing 187,000 words. These data, together with a substantial body of relevant documentation made available by the organisation, has provided a rich picture of Organisation C's experiences of the role of diagnostic benchmarking in organisational improvement.

Data analysis has proceeded in parallel with, and subsequent to, the collection of data from Organisation C, in a style which has conformed closely to Crabtree and Miller's (1992, pp. 17-20) description of an "editing analysis style", whereby the interpreter "...engages the text naively, without a template... searching for segments of text to generate and illustrate categories of meaning." My commitment to reflexivity has continued throughout the analysis, interpretation and writing-up phases, during which research participants who were willing to do so have continued to contribute to the research process by reviewing transcripts and drafts and providing feedback which has enhanced and refined my analysis.

“Route map” for the rest of this document

The rest of this thesis is structured into seven chapters, as described below.

Chapter 2 Literature review - diagnostic benchmarking in a context of organisational excellence, quality improvement and organisational learning is an in-depth review of the body of knowledge about diagnostic benchmarking and related forms of organisational assessment and diagnosis, and of the foundations of and context for this technique, including links to contemporary perspectives on organisational improvement. This chapter establishes the current state of knowledge, demonstrating that there is a wealth of publications on the subject of benchmarking in general and, albeit to a lesser extent, of diagnostic benchmarking (including business-excellence-based self-assessment); but that the focus of much of this literature is on either “how to do it users’ guides” or on the presentation and analysis of aggregate outputs from the benchmarking of many organisations in a particular category, or case studies of organisations’ improvement efforts within which diagnostic benchmarking apparently plays a peripheral role, with little in the way of in-depth insight into the role of diagnostic benchmarking as an enabler of organisational improvement. Hence, a significant gap in the knowledge base is identified. The chapter also reviews (though in less depth) the very substantial literature relating to the domain of knowledge in which diagnostic benchmarking is rooted, namely the domain of “quality improvement” and “business (or organisational) excellence”. This review notes and brings to the foreground the growing body of work which scrutinises “quality” from a more critical perspective, and crystallises the current state of play in terms of the evidence base, controversies and unanswered questions in the quality field. Links are identified between the issue of diagnostic benchmarking’s role and the domain of “organisational learning”. The potential contribution of knowledge in this field, to the focus of this research, is explored.

Chapter 3 The changing face of public services in the UK explores recent developments and the current state of play in the sector in which my case study organisation is located, the UK public services; considering whether there are fundamental and important differences between the ways that organisations are managed and measured across the public-private divide, reviewing the contemporary “quality” and “performance” context for local authorities, and establishing extent and nature of deployment of diagnostic benchmarking, and of business (or “organisational”) excellence in the UK public services.

Chapter 4 - Researching organisations - methodology and methods reviews the knowledge base relating to research philosophy and methodology, exploring the concepts of ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods, and defines my personal stance which has underpinned my approach to the research. The realisation that my worldview aligns with social constructionism has influenced me to focus on an aspect of diagnostic benchmarking that requires an inductive research methodology, collecting and interpreting mainly qualitative primary data. Chapter 4 sets out options that I identified and appraised for the research strategy, and explains my chosen strategy and methods - both as designed and as deployed in practice. The chapter makes the case for a perspective on rigour in the research, based on a set of authenticity criteria, and the case for my chosen approach to data collection, analysis, interpretation and presentation, in which reflexivity is an important component. It reports the process of piloting my primary research strategy at one organisation, and the learning I derived from the pilot study; and the process of selecting a suitable case study organisation and negotiating access to it for the purposes of the research.

Chapter 5 - Organisation C and its journey to excellence - a case study introduces the organisation on which I have focused in order to gather primary data contributing to the aim of this research programme; and also introduces the research participants whose recollections, perceptions, opinions and interpretations comprise the central component of that data. It proceeds to focus on three particular themes - the research participants themselves; relevant aspects of the Council’s background; and its “journey to excellence.”

Chapter 6 - Organisation C's experiences of diagnostic benchmarking reports and analyses Organisation C's extensive experience of improvement, self-assessment and diagnostic benchmarking, focusing particularly upon the Council's deployment of PROBE diagnostic benchmarking tools and the EFQM Excellence Model. This chapter examines in detail the deployment of the tools and approaches that Organisation C has used in its efforts to improve and to achieve "excellence"- how they came to be deployed, in what specific contexts, at what times, with which people involved, with what results and effects. By the end of chapter 6, a number of research findings have begun to emerge, which will be further examined and supplemented during the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 7 - Organisation C's Best Value Review of Regeneration, and the role of PROBE within that review focuses in depth on one specific deployment of diagnostic benchmarking, which occurred in 2001, two years before I began in earnest to gather data in Organisation C. By selecting this particular deployment of PROBE for intensive scrutiny, I have been able to invite those research participants who were directly involved in that diagnostic benchmark to reflect not only upon the benchmarking process itself, but also upon the impact (if any) that it has had upon the organisation - its activities, its outputs and outcomes, and its improvement - either in the short term or over the longer term of the several years which have since elapsed. Chapter 7 views this particular deployment of diagnostic benchmarking through the eyes of those who decided to deploy it and led that deployment, those who participated as team members and stakeholders, those who prompted and supported the adoption of that particular tool in that particular situation, and those from outside the organisation who organised and facilitated the benchmarking process. The chapter surfaces some common themes identified by the stakeholders, and some areas of controversy, which are valuable contributions towards my research aim.

Chapter 8 - Organisation C: reflections and summary of findings draws together the threads of the primary research, with the help of some additional reflections from some of the research participants, and some further data and analysis drawing upon Organisation C's Comprehensive Performance Assessment ("CPA") and Regional Excellence Award assessment processes; and summarises the findings which arise from the data and my analysis thereof. The chapter examines the substantial scope and richness of evidence and ideas which the case study has delivered, and formulates a coherent set of findings in preparation for their appraisal in the light of the existing body of knowledge.

Chapter 9 - Exploring the role of diagnostic benchmarking as an enabler of organisational improvement: discussion, conclusions and reflections draws together the findings identified through the primary research case study, and weaves these threads together with themes, controversies and questions drawn from the relevant domains of knowledge and evidence, in order to draw conclusions regarding the contribution that this research is making to the body of knowledge. The chapter begins with a discussion of the findings in the context of the knowledge base, and proceeds to present conclusions relating to the role of diagnostic benchmarking as an enabler of organisational improvement, and regarding the original contribution of this research programme. The chapter concludes with my reflections upon the research process, and some suggestions for further research that would build upon the work presented here.

Chapter summary and conclusion: the original contribution of this PhD research

My review of the existing body of knowledge has indicated that the role of diagnostic benchmarking as an enabler of organisational improvement has not been the subject of thorough, in-depth research; and that this is an important issue, given the relatively high levels of adoption of this approach by organisations across many countries and sectors, its apparent potential to help these (and other) organisations to improve their practices and performance, and the costs of time and resources that are expended on its deployment. The challenges of understanding the role of diagnostic benchmarking, its efficacy and the factors that might influence that efficacy have not been adequately tackled, and the technique has attracted little scrutiny through the eyes of a inductive research methodology that would be capable of meeting these challenges. Hence, this research programme had the potential to make an original contribution to the body of knowledge, a potential which I believe it has fulfilled.

Given the popularity of the technique, the potential benefits it appears to offer and the anecdotal evidence that these benefits are seldom realised in full, such a contribution will be of significant value to the academic and corporate communities.

Chapter 2 Literature review - diagnostic benchmarking in a context of organisational excellence, quality improvement and organisational learning

This chapter reviews the body of knowledge concerning diagnostic benchmarking and related forms of organisational assessment and diagnosis. It establishes the current state of knowledge in this field by identifying the nature and credibility of available evidence, areas of apparent unanimity and those of controversy, unanswered questions, unexplored avenues and gaps in the knowledge.

As with any attempt to categorise knowledge, the labels and boundaries are, inevitably, debatable and somewhat arbitrary. I regard diagnostic benchmarking as being rooted in the broader field of “benchmarking”, itself a subset of the “business excellence and quality improvement” domain of knowledge. Diagnostic benchmarking is in essence intended to be an aid to organisations in their attempts to implement the “best practices” at the core of “business excellence”, and to apply the principles of “quality improvement” in so doing. The chapter will begin by reviewing this broader domain of knowledge, as a foundation for intensive scrutiny of that element relating to diagnostic benchmarking.

It is impossible to divorce this topic from the broader field of human knowledge, and there are many other domains which are actually or potentially relevant to this research. Figure 1.2 shows several other domains of knowledge that I have identified as having potential to shed useful light onto the research aim, and there are undoubtedly many more. However, any researcher has to understand and acknowledge that there are limits to what they can achieve within a single project; and, indeed, that the pursuit of breadth has inevitable consequences for depth. I have sought to focus my efforts and this chapter on those areas of most direct relevance to the research aim; while drawing upon knowledge from the domain of organisational learning. This chapter will explore the potential contribution of knowledge in this field, to the focus of this research, seeking to achieve some fruitful synthesis and revelation in the process.

The chapter is structured in the following sections:

- ❑ Context: the world through the lenses of “quality improvement” and “business excellence”
- ❑ Historical developments and definitions - the road to business excellence
- ❑ The impact of business excellence
- ❑ Is everybody doing it? And how well? Extent and levels of adoption of business excellence
- ❑ More style than substance? Critiques of business excellence
- ❑ Benchmarking: approaches, techniques and roles
- ❑ Assessing excellence: models and methods of organisational assessment and diagnostic benchmarking
- ❑ The impact and efficacy of diagnostic benchmarking
- ❑ Organisational learning and its links to benchmarking
- ❑ Chapter summary: the body of knowledge: strengths, weaknesses and identified gaps

Context: the world through the lenses of “quality improvement” and “business excellence”

Diagnostic benchmarking is a “healthcheck” for an organisation. In essence, it is a simple technique, designed to measure the extent to which the organisation is deploying “best practice” and achieving “best in class performance”, and to compare this state of play with those which prevail in other, “comparable” organisations⁷. The intended outcome is (at face value, at least) invariably an action plan for organisational improvement, understood and (crucially) owned by managers and employees of the organisation itself; and the intention is that that plan will be implemented, and result in improved organisational performance.

At the core of the diagnostic benchmarking technique is a model of “business excellence”, the blueprint against which organisations are measured and through which they are benchmarked. The detail of the “model” varies from one diagnostic benchmarking tool to another, but the “models” at the heart of the widely-used tools all bear a close resemblance to (or are directly variants of) the “EFQM Excellence Model”. Hence, a starting point in reviewing the knowledge domain which underpins diagnostic benchmarking is to examine this model and the “Foundation” which acts as its custodian.

The European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) declares itself to be:

...a not for profit membership foundation ...the primary source for organisations in Europe looking to excel in their market and in their business. Founded in 1989 by the CEOs of prominent European businesses, EFQM is now the hub of excellent, globally-minded organisations of all sizes and sectors, and both private and public. (EFQM, 2006e)

Cole and Mogab (1995, p. v) describe how “In 1989, fourteen leading European corporations founded the European Foundation for Quality Management. By 1993 the membership had grown to nearly 300 European organizations.” EFQM (EFQM, 2006d) report that in 2006 the membership “comprises more than 700 member organisations of varying sizes from a wide range of industries and sectors.”

⁷ Proponents argue that benchmarking is not necessarily just about comparisons with competitors. Valid comparisons can be made with a broader “peer group”, perhaps crossing sectoral boundaries, and potentially valuable learning opportunities can thereby be identified and pursued.

The wording of EFQM's Mission has evolved over time. In 2002, it was expressed as:

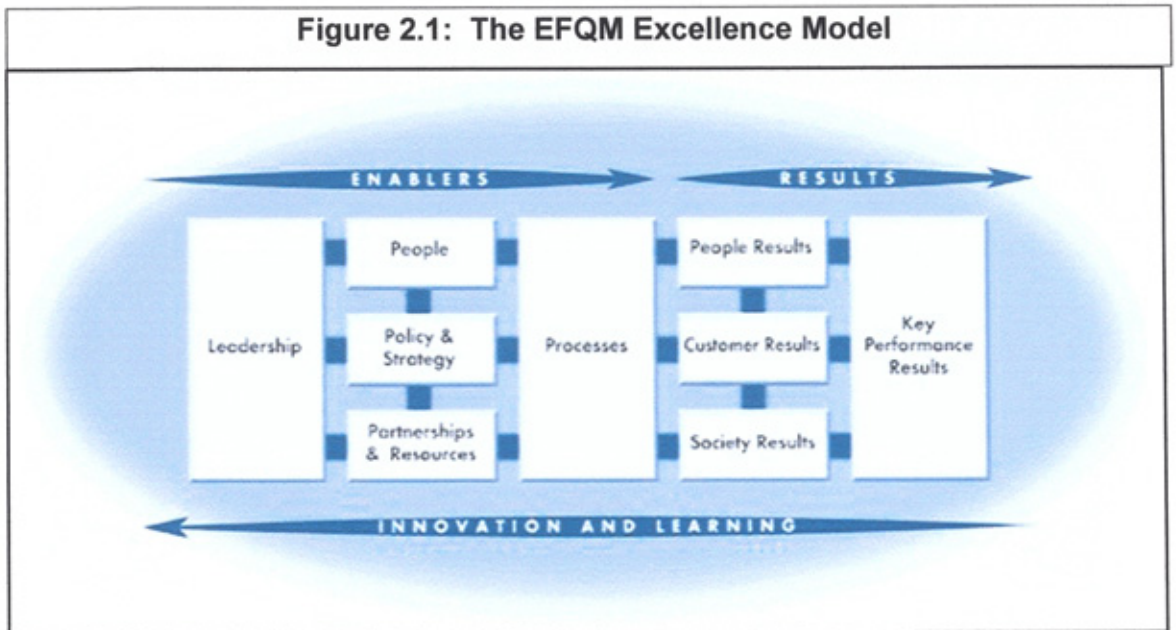
To stimulate and assist organisations throughout Europe to participate in improvement activities leading ultimately to excellence in customer satisfaction, employee satisfaction, impact on society and business results; and

To support the managers of European organisations in accelerating the process of making Total Quality Management a decisive factor for achieving global competitive advantage.

(EFQM, 2002)

The emphasis on excellence in customer satisfaction, employee satisfaction, impact on society and business results reflects the emphasis on these four “results” areas in the Excellence Model itself (see Figure 2.1). It provides a useful sense of direction for an attempt to define “Excellence”; as do other emphases within the Mission - its focus on participation in *improvement activities*; and, despite EFQM's decision in the mid-nineties to re-name the Model (replacing “model for TQM” with “Business Excellence Model”), nevertheless in 2002 the Mission still focused on *making Total Quality Management a decisive factor for achieving global competitive advantage*.

Figure 2.1: The EFQM Excellence Model



Copyright EFQM 2000

By 2006, the mission statement had been reworded:

Our **Mission** is to be the driving force for sustainable excellence in organisations in Europe.

Our **Vision** is a world in which organisations in Europe excel.

Businesses in Europe have come to rely on the EFQM Excellence Model as a way of managing activities to gain efficiency, effectiveness and competitive advantage. How else can you ensure longer term success? By meeting the needs of the customers, employees, financial stakeholders and the community at large.

Through the implementation of organisational excellence initiatives, organisations can achieve significant benefits, such as increased efficiency, reduced costs and greater satisfaction, all leading to better business results.

EFQM has a key role to play in reinforcing the importance of excellence in all business activities. EFQM Members also have a key role by contributing their knowledge and best practices in business improvement. (EFQM, 2006e)

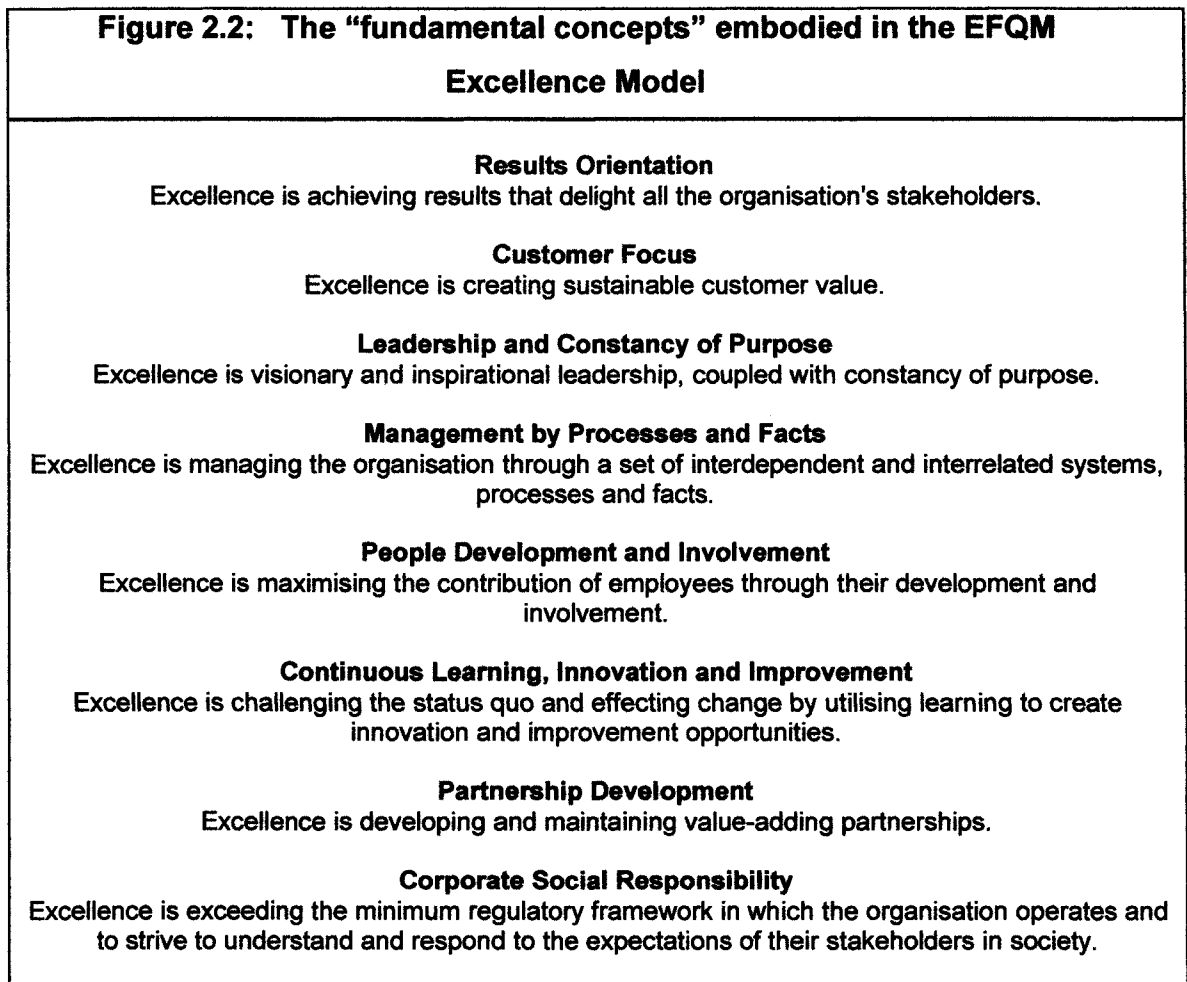
The changing semantics are potentially confusing, perhaps to the extent that they have become an Achilles heel for the quality movement. In its 17-year lifetime, the EFQM's Model has been re-christened twice. "Total Quality Management" became "Business Excellence"; which in turn was truncated to "Excellence". Reavill (1999, pp. 295-296) highlights "...possibly the most serious threat to the further development of TQM... the view that it is 'old hat'"; and asks, "Is 'excellence' a 'new, improved' product, or is it a form of re-packaging devised by... the management consultants?" The semantic changes have offended some. Dale, Zairi, Van der Wiele and Williams (2000), for example, complain that the words "quality" and "TQM" have been progressively stripped out of the Excellence Model, apparently in an attempt to respond to a "fallen star" image of TQM:

In our opinion, the lack of success of TQM is not due to the concept but rather the way it has been introduced into an organization and used by managers. (p. 4)... The EFQM should be concerned with the spread of the TQM concept rather than cosmetic and peripheral changes to the excellence model... (Dale *et al.*, 2000, p. 5)

The EFQM Excellence Model provides an assessment framework which can be and is used by different people in many different ways. As Figure 2.1 illustrates, the Model is structured as a set of nine "criterion parts". It is described by the EFQM (2006b) as the embodiment of eight "fundamental concepts", listed in Figure 2.2.

Each criterion part defines either one of the "enablers" of excellence, or a "results" area, and is developed in more detail via a number of "sub criteria", which in turn describe a number of "areas to address". Thus, the Excellence Model provides a rather detailed and sophisticated set of statements (or questions) which an organisation is invited to consider as it assesses how its own processes and performance results match up to the standards of "excellence".

Figure 2.3 reproduces some of the wording for one of the criterion parts, to illustrate the structure and format of the Excellence Model.



Source: EFQM (2006b)

Figure 2.3: One of the nine criterion parts from the EFQM Excellence Model

The *Leadership* Criterion

How leaders develop and facilitate the achievement of the mission and vision, develop values required for long term success and implement these via appropriate actions and behaviours, and are personally involved in ensuring that the organisation's management system is developed and implemented.

Sub criteria:

- a. How leaders develop the mission, vision and values and are role models of a culture of Excellence
- b. How leaders are personally involved in ensuring the organisation's management system is developed, implemented and continuously improved
- c. How leaders are involved with customers, partners and representatives of society
- d. How leaders motivate, support and recognise the organisation's people

The EFQM provides an explanation of the purposes of its "Excellence Model":

The EFQM Excellence Model is a key framework for helping European organisations in their drive towards being more competitive. The Model is key in four ways:

- i. as a framework which organisations can use to help them develop their Vision and goals for the future in a tangible, measurable way
- ii. as a framework which organisations can use to help them identify and understand the systemic nature of their business, the key linkages and cause and effect relationships.
- iii. as the basis for the European Quality Award, a process which allows Europe to recognise its most successful organisations and promote them as role models of Excellence for others to learn from.
- iv. as a diagnostic tool for assessing the current health of the organisation. Through this process an organisation is better able to balance its priorities, allocate resources and generate realistic business plans.

This fourth, diagnostic use, is known as self-assessment [and] is a catalyst for driving business improvement... Self-Assessment is a comprehensive, systematic and regular review of an organisation's activities and results referenced against the EFQM Excellence Model. The Self-Assessment process allows the organisation to discern clearly its strengths and areas in which improvements can be made and culminates in planned improvement actions which are then monitored for progress. (EFQM, 2002)

The EFQM (2006c) and others (Porter & Tanner, 2004, pp. 317-362; Dale, 2003, pp. 485-495; Zairi & Whymark, 2003, pp. 31-49) describe and recommend a number of alternative approaches to conducting organisational assessments using the Excellence Model. The simplest approach is for an individual or team to discuss and make a judgment about the extent to which their organisation's processes and results measure up to the principles and standards described in the Model. The most sophisticated is to apply the full rigour of the "Award-style" assessment process. I will not attempt here to describe that process in detail, but it is based upon what is described as the "RADAR logic" summarised in Figure 2.4 – a searching set of questions which invite assessors to rigorously challenge the degree of "excellence" of processes, practices and results. Individuals can be trained and accredited to apply the "Award-style" assessment process – training which lasts for several days, and which must be refreshed regularly to maintain full accreditation.

The "Award-style" assessment process delivers an overall score (maximum 1,000) for the organisation, plus an analysis which identifies "key themes" and a series of identified "strengths" and "areas for improvement". The scores awarded by assessment teams are not normally published, but prospective entrants for the "EFQM Excellence Award" (formerly known as the "European Quality Award") are informed (EFQM, 2006a) that to qualify to enter they must present evidence of their potential to score in excess of 500 points; and that "those who achieve a score in excess of 400 points after site visit are Recognised for Excellence. This indicates that the organisation is well managed and aspires to achieve role model status."

Figure 2.4: The “RADAR” logic at the heart of “award-style” assessment using the EFQM Excellence Model

‘RADAR’ stands for: Results – Approach – Deployment – Assessment - Review

RESULTS - do the results:

- cover the interests of all appropriate stakeholders?
- show positive trends or sustained good performance? if so, for how long?
- have targets? are the targets achieved?
- have comparisons with competitors, industry standards, best in class?
- compare well with others?
- show a cause and effect link to approaches?
- measure a balanced set of factors for now and the future?
- give an holistic picture?

ENABLERS - 1: is the APPROACH:

- soundly based? focused on stakeholder needs?
- supporting policy and strategy?
- linked with other appropriate approaches?
- sustainable?
- innovative?
- flexible?
- measurable?

ENABLERS - 2: is the DEPLOYMENT of the approach:

- implemented in all potential areas across the organisation?
- implemented to its full potential?
- achieving all planned benefits?
- systematic?
- understood and accepted by all stakeholders?

ENABLERS - 3: ASSESSMENT & REVIEW: is the approach, and its deployment:

- regularly measured for effectiveness?
- providing learning opportunities?
- benchmarked – against competitors, industry standards, best in class?
- improved, based on learning and output measures?

Source: Appleby (2004)

The Excellence Model has become something of an icon for the “quality movement”. Through the 1990s and to date, business excellence has been topical in business and not-for-profit circles, with governmental and neo-governmental endorsement, as evidenced by:

- “official” websites in the UK (Fit for the Future, 2001; NHS Executive, 2001; DTI, 2003; Cabinet Office, 2003; DTI, 2006) and worldwide (see Northumbria University HyLife/Business Excellence, 2006);
- outputs from a number of officially-endorsed benchmarking and award schemes, encouraging managers to “close the gap” and emulate the best organisations (Neely, Szwejczewski, & Smith, 2000; Business Link, 2002; Neely & Adams, 2002; Business Link, 2003; Owen, Robson, Yarrow, & Appleby, 2003)

Such official endorsements of “quality” are nothing new. The trend began in the 1980s with the National Quality Campaign which evolved into “Managing into the Nineties”, and has continued ever since. Indeed, similar thinking was apparent in earlier plans and campaigns, including the work of George Brown and Tony Benn (then Technology Minister) during the 1960s, the “National Plan” and the work of the “Productivity Council”. More recently, notable examples have included the DTI’s “Winning” reports (DTI & CBI, 1994), based on interviews with “over 100 of the best British companies” and data from the “Britain’s Best Factories” award scheme, which attempted to distil a set of principles to explain “How the best UK companies are winning” (DTI, Training & Enterprise Councils, & Dept. of Employment Group, 1995); the Confederation of British Industry’s “Fit for the Future” report (CBI, 1997), which presented a snapshot of the state of health of UK manufacturing industry, drawing on data gathered through the PROBE benchmarking tools, and concluding that failure to apply best practice costs the UK economy £300 billion per annum (p. 4); and subsequently the national best practice campaign of the same name, which had as its mission statement “To achieve a massive increase in the number of companies engaged in the transfer of best practice.” (Fit for the Future, 2001).

The U.K establishment has not been alone in promoting “the quality message”, as evidenced, for example, by the New Zealand Ministry for Economic Development’s series of business excellence-focused studies (Campbell-Hunt, Harper, & Hamilton, 1993; Campbell-Hunt & Corbett, 1996; Knuckey, Leung-Wai, & Meskill, 1999; Knuckey *et al.*, 2002) and an Australian equivalent (Australian Manufacturing Council, 1994); fulsome and sustained support for benchmarking at a European level (see for example Keegan, 1998; Keegan, 1999); and high profile “official” promotion of business excellence in many other countries.

Recent “official” endorsement of the “quality” message in the UK has continued to take on new guises, including Cabinet Office guidance such as “Getting it Together: a Guide to Quality Schemes and the Delivery of Public Services” (Cabinet Office, 2001); the work of the NHS’s Modernisation Agency, which recently evolved into the NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement (NHS Institute, 2006); and the Public Service Benchmarking Service (Public Sector Benchmarking Service, 2006).

Business Excellence has some high-profile advocates. Patricia Hewitt MP (then Secretary of State for Trade and Industry) wrote:

I want Government, business, trade unions and other key stakeholders in our economy... to create a culture of continuous improvement by ensuring a flow of best practice information from those who can provide it to those who could benefit from it. (Hewitt, 2002)

The British Quality Foundation reported that:

Prime Minister Tony Blair has led the calls for organisations to raise their performance by turning to Midlands Excellence. In a video address to the 1,700 guests at November’s... Awards ceremony, Mr. Blair spoke of the importance of continuous improvement in driving the regional and national economy... He urged others to follow the lead of this year’s finalists and those who already embrace excellence, adding: ‘Their example should act as a spur to others to go out and emulate them.’ (British Quality Foundation, 2000).

There is some debate about whether business excellence represents new theory and practice, or is perhaps a re-packaging of ideas that have been around in other forms (Dale *et al.*, 2000; Hammond, 2000; Porter & Tanner, 2004), but undeniably it has developed as part of “the quality movement” (Drummond, 1992). This movement has suffered from a surfeit of rhetoric, acronyms and competing products and brands, and a paucity of evidence of beneficial outcomes. The “hype” that has at times pervaded the movement has undoubtedly been damaging, leading some to believe that a panacea (or a “quick-fix”) was on offer, and tending to mask the substance of the “message”. Inevitably, there has been disillusionment with business excellence, and some research has indicated disappointing results (for example Edwards, 2000; Ovretveit, 1994), with some suggesting that failure rates are as high as 75% (Cao, Clarke, & Lehaney, 2000). On the other hand, there is a growing body of published work (for example Easton & Jarrell, 1999; Hendricks & Singhal, 2002; British Quality Foundation, 2003) which appears to demonstrate beneficial effects of implementing business excellence – a point which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Some commentators go so far as to suggest that business excellence may be fundamentally changing the nature of management. Mogab and Cole conclude that:

The TQM firm represents a formidable competitor that will continue to make its presence known in global markets of the future. It is neither a fad nor a panacea. The TQM firm is a new paradigm whose strengths and weaknesses we are only beginning to understand.

(Mogab & Cole, 1999, p. 383).

Within their general endorsement of “quality” and “excellence”, advocates such as the DTI, Cabinet Office, CBI and NHS Executive all promote “self-assessment” and “benchmarking” as practices that organisations should be deploying. The widespread, enthusiastic promotion of the EFQM Excellence Model, for example, is above all an encouragement to organisations to engage in self-assessment (and/or “benchmarking”), as well as to make use of the Model as a guide within their planning processes.

However, some are sceptical about the benefits organisations that engage in such activities actually derive. Friedewald (2001), for example, reports the findings of an in-depth study

of 27 organisations' participation in a benchmarking network and related common interest group activities, and concludes (p. 1) that:

In this case, group benchmarking was not found to be a particularly effective method of finding best practice, though it was significantly more useful in helping participants learn how to benchmark. Effectiveness was found to be contingent upon the effort expended, how 'ready' organisations (and individuals) were to benchmark, the structure/nature of the process, the extent of facilitation and the quality of the common interest group process.

Unwin (2005) likens change to a journey, and identifies two different types of traveller:

I refer to those who see the journey as a sequence of neat ordered steps as *day-trippers*. Where they accept the need for change, they see their journey as one with clearly defined parameters, clear steps to take and things to do. Day-trippers embark on change... only when the steps are known, the costs understood, and the timescales agreed... Organizations whose mindset recognizes change as this complex developing journey I call *explorers*. They embark on change with a clear vision of the outcome to be achieved but with no fixed path by which it will be reached. (Unwin, 2005, p. 4)

When these two travellers look at the Excellence Model, they see two different things:

The day-tripper is drawn towards detail and answers, and seeks to find them within their interpretation of the Model... In contrast, the explorer doesn't see black and white or even just shades of grey... when they look at the Excellence Model, they see a painting, a work of art, a stimulus to thinking. It doesn't set out to define, rather it evokes, it stirs them into having a view, a perspective and opinion. Not the binary opinion of the day-tripper... It makes no sense to ask whether the Mona Lisa is right or wrong and therefore no answer volunteered can make any sense. (pp. 8 - 9)

Historical developments and definitions - the road to business excellence

Given diagnostic benchmarking's strong roots in the field of total quality management and business excellence, it will be instructive to clarify definitions and concepts in this field, and an understanding of its historical development.

Lorente, Dewhurst and Dale (1998) seek out the origins of tqm, citing Stuelpnagel (1993), who "...considers that in Ford and Crowter's book *My Life and Work*, published in 1926, the origins of tqm can be found." However it seems that the term "tqm" itself appeared around the mid 1980s. "Bernowski (1992) states that the term was initially coined in 1985 by the Naval Air Systems Command to describe its Japanese-style management approach to quality improvement." Dale (writing in Lorente *et al.*, 1998, p. 380) suggests that the term "tqm" came to prominence in the UK through the Department of Trade and Industry's National Quality Campaign which was launched in 1983, and through "the pioneering work of organisations such as IBM." He and his co-authors present (Table 2.1) a chronology of important events in the development of tqm, beginning with the Hawthorne studies in the 1920s and culminating in publication of the Baldrige Award in 1987, two years before the EFQM published their European equivalent.

Table 2.1: Important events in the development of TQM

1924-1932	Hawthorne studies demonstrated the importance of the social and psychological climate in work
1924	Shewart developed statistical process control
1926	Bell Telephone began to apply statistical control methods
Mid-1940s	The American army pushed the use of sampling methods during World War II
1950s	A large number of attempts at work improvement were undertaken (e.g. job enrichment, work redesign, participative management, quality of work life and worker involvement)
1950	First visit of Deming to Japan
1951	Creation of "Deming Application Prize" in Japan First edition of Juran's <i>Quality Control Handbook</i>
1954	First visit of Juran to Japan Maslow's theories about human needs
1960	Liberalisation of economy in Japan with pressure to improve quality to compete with foreign companies McGregor's X and Y theories
1961	First edition of Feigenbaum's <i>Total Quality Control</i>
1962	The idea of quality circles appeared in the first issue of the Japanese journal <i>Quality Control for the Foreman</i>
Late 1960s and early 1970s	The pressure of Japanese companies began to be felt in American companies
1972	QFD was developed at Mitsubishi's Kobe shipyard site
1973	After the 1973 oil crisis the Just in Time (JIT) system was adopted by a vast number of Japanese companies. A small number of American and European companies began to apply this system in the 1980s.
Mid-1970s	Quality circles began to be widely introduced in the USA, the first quality circle programme was launched in Lockheed in 1974 and in the UK it was Rolls-Royce which introduced the concept in 1979.
1979	First edition of Crosby's <i>Quality Is Free</i> Xerox Corp. started to apply the benchmarking concept to processes Publication of the BS5750 quality management series.

(Table continues overleaf)

Table 2.1: Important events in the development of TQM (continued)

1980	An NBC television documentary about the 'Japanese miracle' proposed Deming as a key element in this miracle.
1981	Ouchi's Z theory.
1982	First edition of Deming's <i>Quality, Productivity and Competitive Position</i> .
1983	"Quality on the line", published by Garvin in <i>Harvard Business Review</i> , analysed the differences between Japanese and American companies, showing some of the reasons for the better performance of the former. A paper about Taguchi's design of experiments is published in <i>Harvard Business Review</i> .
1985	The Naval Air Systems Command named its Japanese-style management approach 'total quality management'.
1986	First edition of Deming's <i>Out of the Crisis</i> . It became a bestseller.
1987	First edition of ISO9000 quality management system series. Publication of Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award.

Source: Lorente et al (1998)

Cole (1999) believes that there has not been one (American) quality movement, but many. "These different approaches reflected the competitive circumstances of firms and industries, as well as their uncertainty about how to effectively respond to Japanese competitive pressures." (p. 18). He describes various "mini fads" in the evolution of the quality movement (Table 2.2), and points out that their sequence and timing have varied from sector to sector.

Cole (p. 14) elaborates on the meaning of "fad":

...the term *fad* connotes transiency. Webster's... Dictionary defines fad as 'a pursuit or interest followed usually widely, but briefly and capriciously, with exaggerated zeal and devotion.' The media delight in pointing to the rapid succession of fads [which] are seen as costly distractions that keep managers from concentrating on running the business... When a new approach does not yield the desired results, as is often the case, management acts capriciously, moving on to another seemingly more promising approach. Employees have learned through much experience to weather a succession of fads with a 'this too will pass' philosophy. The expression 'flavor of the month' is well ingrained in American corporate life...

Table 2.2: Quality fads: beginning periods by technique or strategy

Late 1970s, Early 1980s

Quality control circles

Statistical Process Control (SPC)

Senior management commitment and leadership

Competing gurus (Juran, Deming, Crosby)

Need to break down functional isolation in favor of cross-functional cooperation (especially in new product-development); teams (quality improvement teams); self-managing teams (both within and across functions)

Quality Function Deployment - concurrent engineering - Taguchi

Mid-1980s

Customer focus

Supplier collaboration

Continuous improvement (Kaizen): process-improvement focus for all business processes

Baldrige Prize (first awarded 1987)

Partnering with customers (co-design) and suppliers

Using Baldrige award protocol for company diagnostic

1990 customer satisfaction measurement

Benchmarking

Early 1990s

ISO9000

System alignment (rewards aligned with desired outcomes, quality aligned with important business objectives)

Policy deployment (quality integrated with strategic business plan)

Deployment of annual objectives through all levels and employees

Business process reengineering

Source: Cole (1999, p. 19)

Chapter 2 Literature review

Cole describes (pp. 93-97) a classic example of a fad, the “quality circle craze” which swept through American industry in the early 1980s, reporting that “an enormous bandwagon effect” occurred as the fad took hold, with companies adopting quality circles because it was the thing to, because their domestic competitors were adopting, because the Japanese were doing it, and because the American media were telling them that they were backward if they didn’t. Companies attempted to implement quality circles by “slotting them in” to existing structures, missing the point that circles were only one component of the approaches being applied by Japanese companies in their generally successful efforts to improve quality and performance. Confusion and misinformation reigned. Cole suggests that these developments fit with a stereotypical description of a fad: “...management, faced with a crisis, initially adopts minimalist tactical changes, dismissing any notion that corporate strategy needs to be changed.” (p. 95).

By the late 1980s, the use of quality circles was in sharp decline. Despite their failure to deliver the anticipated dramatic results, however, Cole suggests that there have been lasting beneficial effects, and that “There is reason to believe that managers learned from their quality circle experience.” (p. 99). He quotes the manager who ran the Westinghouse business that was the first in that company to introduce quality circles, who:

...reflected on the evolution of quality circles into various forms of team activity: ‘It was a good way to get started and, on balance, a positive phase. As I look back it seems almost trivial, childish. But it had a profound aspect to it. It was the beginning of empowering people.’

Cole (p. 99) reflects that:

...management learning and fads are not automatically contradictory phenomena. Fads can serve as building blocks for future management activities, but not always in a conscious strategic fashion. Indeed, purposive learning likely occurs at the tail end of a fad, when decision makers realize the limitations of current practices and try to calculate how much of the previous experiences they can salvage and build upon in their new initiatives.

Dewhurst, Lorente and Dale (1999) highlight the difficulty of defining tqm:

It is a management philosophy which is widely implemented in companies and discussed in considerable detail in the academic literature, analysis of which indicates that most organisations and researchers have their own definition of the term. (pp. 265-266)

The same authors (Lorente *et al.*, 1998) have reviewed the work of a number of others (including Dale, Boaden, & Lascelles, 1994; Saraph, Benson, & Schroeder, 1989; Flynn, Schroeder, & Sakakibara, 1994; and Ahire, Goldhar, & Waller, 1996) who have tried to define tqm, and provide their analysis of the “common dimensions” (Table 2.3). They point out that “...almost every writer on the subject has their own definition, by and large devising it to suit their own beliefs, prejudices and business and academic experiences.” (Lorente *et al.*, 1998, p. 378).

Table 2.3: Total quality management

Dimensions	Description	Dale et al. (1994)	Saraph et al. (1989)	Flynn et al. (1994)	Ahire et al. (1996)
Top management support	Top management commitment is one of the major determinants of successful TQM implementation. Top management has to be the first in applying and stimulating the TQM approach, and they have to accept the maximum responsibility for the product and service offering. Top management also has to provide the necessary leadership to motivate all employees.	Commitment & leadership of chief executive officer. Planning & organisation	Role of divisional top management and quality policy	Top management support	Top management commitment
Customer relationship	The needs of customers and consumers and their satisfaction have always to be in the mind of all employees. It is necessary to identify these needs and their level of satisfaction.	Culture change	-	Customer involvement	Customer focus
Supplier relationship	Quality is a more important factor than price in selecting suppliers. Long-term relationship with suppliers has to be established and the company has to collaborate with suppliers to help improve the quality of products/services	Culture change	Supplier quality management	Supplier involvement	Supplier quality management
Workforce management	Workforce management has to be guided by the principles of: training, empowerment of workers and teamwork. Adequate plane of personnel recruitment and training have to be implemented and workers need the necessary skills to participate in the improvement process.	Culture change. Education and training.	Training. Employee relations.	Workforce management.	Employee empowerment Employee training

(Table continues overleaf)

Table 2.3: Total quality management (continued)

Dimensions	Description	Dale et al. (1994)	Saraph et al. (1989)	Flynn et al. (1994)	Ahire et al. (1996)
Employee attitudes and behaviour	Companies have to stimulate positive work attitudes, including loyalty to the organisation, pride in work, a focus on common organisational goals and the ability to work cross-functionally.	Involvement	-	Quality improvement rewards.	Employee involvement.
Product design process	All departments have to participate in the design process and work together to achieve a design that satisfies the requirements of the customer, according to the technical, technological and cost constraints of the company.	-	Product / service design	Product design	Design quality management
Process flow management	Housekeeping along the lines of the 5S concept. Statistical and nonstatistical improvement instruments should be applied as appropriate. Processes need to be mistake proof. Self-inspection undertaken using clear work instructions. The process has to be maintained under statistical control	Use of tools and techniques	Process management / operating procedures	Process management	SPC usage
Quality data & reporting	Quality information has to be readily available and the information should be part of the visible management system. Records about quality indicators have to be kept, including scrap, rework and cost of quality.	Measurement & feedback	Quality data & reporting	Feedback	Internal quality info. usage
Role of the quality dept	Quality department need access to top management and autonomy and also has to combine the work of other departments	-	Role of the quality dept.	-	-
Benchmark'kg	A benchmarking policy for key processes should be in place.	-	-	-	Benchmark'king

(Source: Lorente et al. (1998))

Zairi (1994) also identifies confusion about the meaning of tqm: “There seems to be a lot of wrestling with questions such as ‘Is TQM a programme?’, ‘Is it a concept?’, ‘Is it a management philosophy?’, ‘Is it something else in disguise?’” (p. 6). He quotes a typical statement from a manager concerned with the delivery of short-term business results: “TQM has given all it has got; as an *initiative* it is completely drained now. We need something else to rejuvenate the business and give it a new lease of life.” Zairi carefully avoids “terminology destruction”, opting instead to introduce a “gentle” description of tqm:

...essentially a whole array of techniques, management principles, technologies and methodologies which are put together to work for the benefit of the end customer. TQM seeks to develop organizations by creating better planning, better external focus, better design and prioritization... strengthening weak processes and protecting strong areas which give the organizations concerned an edge over their competitors (through continuous improvement and benchmarking). TQM helps organizations to build strong *capability* enabling them to respond to current and future market pressures. It ensures that the voice of the customer (level of demand) is always matched by the voice [of] the process (level of delivered ability). TQM values people and people productivity through innovation, creativity, problem solving and a commitment continuously to improve quality and optimize value-creation for the benefit of the end customer. TQM is a corporate-wide process and has to involve all levels of employees. In addition, TQM is about the continuous process of introducing best practice to ensure sustainability and positive competitiveness. In a sense, it is about the management of change; it is therefore *limitless* and *timeless* in its approach. (Zairi, 1994: 6-7)

Cole sums up (Table 2.4) characteristics of “old” and “new” quality models, separating these characteristics from the plethora of labels and titles under which they might appear.

Table 2.4: Characteristics of old and new quality models

Old Quality Model	New Quality Model
1. Internal orientation stressing conformance to requirements (fitness to standard); reduction of internal costs is filter used to evaluate quality improvement proposals	1. 'Market-in' approach provides strong customer orientation; customer acceptability is initial filter used to evaluate quality improvement proposals
2. Quality just one of many functional specialities	2. Quality as umbrella theme for organizing work; used as common language throughout the firm
3. Quality not seen as competitive element as long as you match your competitors	3. Improved quality as strong competitive strategy
4. Quality as specialized function carried out by small number of experts in quality department reporting to manufacturing	4. All-employee, all-departmental involvement as pivotal strategy for improving quality of every business process; attention to incentives for all.
5. Downstream focus on inspection, defect detection, and 'band-aid' solutions	5. Upstream prevention activities key to quality improvement; built-in quality
6. Quality improvement activities involve limited repetitive cycle of detect and repair, leading at best to stable equilibrium	6. Well-defined problem-solving methodology and training activities tied to continuous quality improvement, aimed at improving key processes pivotal for business success.
7. Quality as stand-alone effort promoted by quality department, not well integrated into rest of organizational activities	7. Integration of quality into control systems of goals, plans, and actions
8. Each functional speciality operating as independently as possible, maximising their own functional goals, sometimes at the expense of the firm	8. Focus on cross-functional cooperation to achieve firm-level objectives
9. See item 1	9. Anticipation of customer need before customers aware of them (fitness to latent requirements)

Note: These characteristics are drawn from the literature (Ishikawa & Lu, 1985; Mizuno, 1988; Scherkenbach, 1986; Shiba, Graham, & Walden, 1993) as well as from my own (Cole, 1989) research on the subject in 1989. This research involved interviewing officials at 20 leading Japanese manufacturing firms noted for their quality achievements across a broad range of industries.

Source: Cole (1999, p. 26)

Oldfield (2002b) credits the publication of the Quality Systems standards, “BS5750”, with kick-starting the momentum of the quality movement in the UK. She highlights the range of “quality tools” which are on offer to today’s businesspeople, including “...the Excellence Model, process improvement, benchmarking, business process reengineering and six sigma”; and suggests that it is the quality practitioner’s task to evaluate which tool or practice will be most suited to their organisation. (Oldfield, 2002b, p. 2)

Cole and Mogab (1995) describe tqm as:

...an emerging new paradigm that serves to guide the design and management of economic organizations... [it] has its intellectual origins with W. A. Shewart, who pioneered the application of statistics to manufacturing. His ideas were expanded by W. Edwards Deming and Joseph M. Juran and placed within the framework of a managerial philosophy that was at once optimistic and egalitarian... therefore, a decidedly American paradigm... yet, today it is most often identified by such terms as ‘Japanese management system’ and ‘Toyota production system’... because the ideas of Deming, Juran, and others first took root in the recovering economy of post-World War II Japan, whose firms desperately needed some way to make their products acceptable in the world markets, especially in the US market. (p. xi)

Cole and Mogab (1995, p. xii - xiii) note that there are varied and contradictory opinions about the importance of the “new paradigm”, with some taking the position that it will replace what the authors call the MP/SM [mass production/scientific management] paradigm because of its logical superiority. Others suggest that it is a special case, appropriate to the postwar Japanese “hot house” in which it took root, grew, and blossomed; but perhaps not to other times and places. Still others regard it as having potential almost anywhere but currently constrained by the idiosyncrasies of particular management cadres or other organisation-specific characteristics. The authors acknowledge that, for them, this remains an unanswered question, but suggest that “... versions of the CIF have found a place in various Western settings and even in some developing countries.” The “CIF” is Cole and Mogab’s conceptual model of an “ideal-type Continuous

Improvement Firm”, which would display all of the theoretical features and characteristics of tqm:

Whether any of them will be as effective as the paradigmatic progenitors is left undetermined. What does emerge clearly... is that some capability for continuous improvement may be better than none. In other words, there are many situations in which a firm does not have to approach the ‘ideal type’ in order to gain a competitive edge... the firm just has to be better at TQM than the competition.... [we suggest]... that it is the MO/SM paradigm rather than our culture per se that makes it difficult for Westerners to design and operate CIFs.

(Cole and Mogab, 1995, p. xiii)

Khoo and Tan (2003) address the same theme, highlighting differences between the Japanese and American approaches to “managing for quality”, and suggesting that, rather than “the MO/SM” paradigm, differences in aspects of management and work culture may arise from the contrast between the Japanese people’s concept of human relations and management philosophy, shaped by Shintoism and Buddhism, and Western advocacy of freedom, creative thinking, entrepreneurship and competitiveness. (Khoo & Tan, 2003, p. 14)

Hermel and Ramis-Pujol (2003) trace the evolution of “excellence”, suggesting that Peters and Waterman brought this concept into the consciousness and practice of managers and organisations during the early 1980s; and that “theory has followed timidly afterwards”. (p. 230). They suggest that Peter Senge’s *The Fifth Discipline* (1990b) can be seen as a further development in the path of organizational excellence, sparking renewed interest in the concept of “learning organization”, and reminding us “... that the real lesson of the quality movement is the ‘learning’”. (pp. 236 - 237).

Hermel and Ramis-Pujol highlight the links between Senge's work and that of one of the "father figures" of the quality movement, W. Edwards Deming, suggesting that Deming (1993) was frustrated by his realisation:

...that total quality as it actually developed was stopping people from thinking. Managers in the USA conceive programs and just roll them out throughout their organizations, and quality programs have not been an exception... Senge... views Deming's management philosophy as essentially creating learning organizations. Two aspects pointed out by Deming are of the greatest importance for Senge: his appreciation of systems and his focus on intrinsic motivation (Galagan, 1991) ... Deming thought that unfortunately quality was not applied the way he had intended. According to Senge, it is exactly the same as is currently happening with the learning organization, and the reasons are similar: 'The number one impediment in this work is that it takes time, patience, perseverance and dedication. Most management teams want things to happen quickly... This has been and continues to be the main reason that prevented Deming's work from being applied and that our organizational-learning work still struggles.' (Senge & Carstedt, 2001).

(Hermel & Ramis-Pujol, 2003, pp. 237-238)

The impact of business excellence

There are numerous published examples of individual organisations reporting financial benefits of quality improvement initiatives. For example, DCM, the logistics arm of Unipart, has been promoted as an exemplar by the British Quality Foundation and the “Fit for the Future” campaign, which reports that the company “helps employees reach their full potential through... quality circles”; and that the quality circles programme achieved cost savings of over \$2 million in 2000:

‘Although many companies strive to become true “learning organisations”, Unipart has been focused on this objective for longer than most,’ says Keith Jones [Managing Director]. ‘Sourcing knowledge and best practice internally and externally and feeding it back on a group and local level are... integral to the way we work.’ (Fit for the Future, 2001).

Cole reports evidence from a survey of American Fortune 1000 companies in the early 1990s which found that, at least among these larger, generally “blue chip” companies, tqm was achieving positive outcomes:

Eighty-three percent of the firms report that their experience with TQM has been positive or very positive...Large majorities report positive results measured by indicators in the two performance clusters: direct performance outcomes and profitability and competitiveness. [The survey] reports *perceived* impacts by respondents and therefore should not be treated as hard data. However, it is not unusual for researchers investigating perceived effectiveness of management programs to report negative results. Therefore the results are quite suggestive. Much more convincing, however, are the findings of Easton and Jarrell (1998). Using a sophisticated analytical model, they examined the impact of TQM deployment on actual financial performance measured by stock market returns and accounting variables. They found a strong statistical association between deployment of TQM and improved financial performance in the three to five years following initial deployment. The results were particularly strong for those firms judged to have adopted the most advanced TQM practices.

(Cole, 1999, p. 21)

Not all surveys of the effectiveness of tqm have reported such positive results. For example, Myers and Ashkenas (1993) highlighted perceived shortcomings in tqm's effectiveness:

Nationwide, countless organizations have committed to TQM. Yet, several studies suggest that TQM, in its present form, cannot claim the kinds of success that would justify current levels of investment. (Myers & Ashkenas, 1993, p. 40)

During 2001, the (UK) Engineering Quality Forum surveyed several thousand engineering executives, representing "a wide cross section" of the engineering and manufacturing sectors of UK industry, regarding the influences of the various quality initiatives of recent years. They reported that these sectors:

...were first to use the principles of quality management and, more recently, TQM and other initiatives. However, only 34 per cent of engineering executives felt that the initiatives had any real influence on the quality of manufactured goods... there is still confusion in industry as to the benefits and targets of the various initiatives... apart from the recent government publication *Getting it Together* there is no 'national register' or *Which?* Magazine approach to give unbiased guidance to... companies. (Engineering Quality Forum, 2002b, p. 49).

A number of researchers have explored cause-and-effect linkages between the implementation of business excellence and organisational performance and value. George (2002), for example, asserts that "...if you have quality, you'll beat the market". He reports tracking share values of a subset (the "Q-100") of the "Standard and Poor's 500"⁸, the subset containing 100 companies which were identified as being (most) committed to tqm, concluding that "The performance of the Q-100 in both bull and bear markets suggests quality improvement efforts have a direct and measurable impact on stock performance." (p. 37). Others (Dale & Plunkett, 1991; Cole & Mogab, 1995; Hendricks & Singhal, 1997; 1999; 2001b; 2001a; 2002; Oakland, 1998; Wilkinson, Redman, Snape, & Marchinton, 1998; Easton & Jarrell, 1998; 1999; European Centre for Business Excellence, 1998; Engineering Quality Forum, 2002a; Engineering Quality Forum, 2002b; British Quality

Foundation, 2003) have arrived at similar conclusions. Porter and Tanner (2004), reviewing much of this evidence, conclude (p. 60) that there is a clear link between quality activities and organizational performance, but note that "...an excellence approach is not a guarantee of success", and that "When the benefit is delivered is another talking point, with some research suggesting that it is not delivered until 'world-class' status is achieved. Other researchers, however, believe that the level of benefit increases as the maturity of approach increases."

Proving a causal link between the implementation of business excellence and organisational performance is fraught with difficulty, not least because of the difficulty of determining whether an organisation has actually implemented business excellence; and, if so, to what extent. There is a danger of descending into circular arguments - for example, several of the studies use entry for, or winning of, excellence awards as a proxy for the implementation of business excellence; which begs the question of whether there might be a tendency for higher-performing organisations to apply for excellence awards, or whether their stronger performance is genuinely attributable to their implementation of business excellence. Easton and Jarrell (1998, pp. 256-257) acknowledge some of the difficulties and are critical of research that is over-reliant on questionnaire-based approaches that allow self-selection into the sample and are subject to potentially large variations in interpretation of terminology:

...such studies provide weak evidence concerning causality, even when statistically significant associations are observed, because the direction of causality is often unclear. In many cases, it is at least plausible that, because of the availability of additional resources, improved performance drives the more extensive use of the 'progressive' practices studied... as it is that the progressive practices caused the performance. While it is impossible to prove causality through observational studies... studies that focus as tightly as possible on the period of the management changes and that use a carefully developed control methodology clearly provide far more compelling evidence than those that do not. (pp. 257 - 258)

⁸ According to George (2002), Standard and Poor's "S & P 500" is used as a benchmark by 97% of U.S. money managers and pension plan sponsors.

Easton and Jarrell's own research has attempted to address these difficulties "... [by applying an adapted version of] the event study methodology, commonly used in corporate finance, to examine the impact of TQM on firm financial performance" (p. 256); using semistructured interviews to categorise sample firms in terms of how "advanced" they are in their implementation of TQM; and comparing their performance both with control portfolios of "firms that do not appear to have implemented TQM" p. (267), and with expert analysts' forecasts of performance. They conclude that "...there is clear evidence that the long-term performance of firms that implemented TQM is improved... [and] compelling evidence that management methods that constitute TQM are associated with improved performance." (p. 298); while acknowledging (p. 302) that "It is possible that there are enabling factors that would make TQM effective in some companies and ineffective in others."

It seems, then, that the evidence in favour of business excellence and its positive impact is growing in quantity and rigour. Powell (1995), however, sounds a warning note in terms of interpretation of this evidence. His methodology has similarities to that of Easton and Jarrell, and leads him to similar conclusions. However, Powell points out that particular features of business excellence, such as a focus on key aspects of people management, are indeed associated with strong business performance; but that the influence of these features is identifiable whether they are deployed within a "business excellence" context or independently of such a context:

...although TQM can produce competitive advantage, adopting the vocabularies, ideologies, and tools promoted by the TQM gurus and advocates matters less than developing the underlying resources that make TQM implementation successful. And these resources appear to produce success with or without formal TQM adoption... Perhaps TQM's highest purpose, and its real contribution... is in providing a framework that helps firms understand and acquire these resources as part of an integrated change program. One executive in a successful non-TQM firm put it best: 'If a company needs a fancy program to listen to their customers, then I think they'd better get one.'

(Powell, 1995, p. 31)

Is everybody doing it? And how well? Extent and levels of adoption of business excellence

Reavill (1999) sums up the quality scene at the end of the 1990s, concluding that:

TQM is alive and well and living as a fully established and valued technique in large commercial and industrial organisations... Areas of early or moderate penetration such as SMEs [small to medium-sized enterprises] and NICs [newly industrialized countries] should be developed further. Other areas such as public and 'third sector' organisations could benefit their customers by the adoption of TQM practices, but the transplantation of the TQM technique to new environments with different cultures is unlikely to be problem free.

(Reavill, 1999: 297)

Reavill also comments (p. 295) that some organisations have adopted tqm for reasons other than improvement of effectiveness and efficiency, in the belief that their continuing prosperity is related to having some form of quality accreditation: "Thus acquisition of quality accreditation is for its own sake, an attempt to obtain a 'seal of approval', rather than for any value that the adoption of TQM might give..." Such adoption for "the wrong reasons" may not be completely without value, however: "Work done in Hong Kong (Chan, 1998) suggests that many of the companies which adopt TQM for 'seal of approval' purposes learn its value, and continue to integrate it into their management policies for its contribution towards operational improvements."

Cole (1999) cites two surveys (Lawler, Mohrman, & Ledford, 1992; 1995) which indicated that, by 1993, 76% of Fortune 1000 companies had a tqm or similar program: "These programs continue in approximately three quarters of the largest U.S. companies, a quite remarkable figure given that the initial burst of interest in quality took place in the early 1980s. If it is a fad in the conventional sense of that term, it is clearly a long-lasting one." (Cole, 1999, pp. 20-21). The surveys also identified increasing deployment of tqm practices within the companies; on average 50% of employees were reported to be covered by tqm activities, with 25% of the companies saying that all employees were covered. Cole (p. 22) draws upon other survey evidence to suggest that, outside the elite group of mainly large companies in the Fortune 1000, the rate and extent of adoption had been slower, but has

nevertheless been quite far-reaching: 34% of respondents to Osterman's (1994) national survey (of for-profit American business establishments with over 50 employees) reported adopting tqm; and 37% of respondents to the National Center on the Educational Quality of the Workforce's (1995) national survey of private sector firms in 1994 "reported a formal TQM program."

Charlesworth (2000) conducted a survey of performance improvement initiatives on behalf of the (UK) Institute of Management and the British Quality Foundation, by sending questionnaires to a random sample of 3,000 individual members of the Institute of Management. She concluded that:

Nearly seven in ten firms have already introduced a formal improvement programme, and one in fourteen have plans for such a programme. A wide variety of approaches have been adopted including liP, TQM and the BEM, and generally managers rate very positively the effect of these initiatives on their organisation's business success. (Charlesworth, 2000, p. 26)

Charlesworth (p. 2) identifies arguments that are used in favour of "quality management", including customer demand, increased market share, product differentiation; and competitive pressures to improve service quality. Identified barriers to successful implementation included cost constraints, and lack of top-level commitment: "only one in ten executives linked programme failure to it being just another management fad, which indicates how far improvement issues have entered into current thinking." Charlesworth (p. 27) makes recommendations to guide individuals and organisations, highlighting the importance of sustained commitment from senior management, the merits of including sceptics or mavericks in internal self-assessments, and that "...the route to quality and performance improvement must be developed within the organisation. External consultants can provide help and advice on the changes needed to achieve the goals, but these must be set and owned by the organisation itself."

Echoing Powell (1995), Cole points out that problems with the definition of “tqm”, and resistance to the terminology itself, could have a significant effect on findings regarding the extent of adoption; and that:

...the quality movement has had a powerful impact on many firms that did not choose to formally adopt a TQM program. Many companies, known well for their quality initiatives, have never used the term TQM to refer to these efforts. At companies like Hewlett-Packard, TQM... is used among the quality personnel and with outside customers but not in most divisions among ordinary personnel. Indeed, as one HP quality department manager said to me, ‘[T]hat’s a name we “quality geeks” use, but if you mention TQM to line personnel they are likely to say “that is something we tried and it didn’t work.”’ ...Yet HP is known for its leadership in adopting the new quality model. (Cole, 1999, pp. 22-23)

It seems, then, that whatever the precise statistics (and semantics), very large numbers of organisations have to some extent “adopted” business excellence. However, the “extent” to which they have implemented the theoretical principles, and the “quality” of that implementation, are another matter. Cole and Mogab (1995, p. 2) identify common shortcomings in the implementation of tqm, suggesting that many Western firms have tried to adopt some of the technical methods of their foreign competitors, but continue to show ambivalence about developing the human capital:

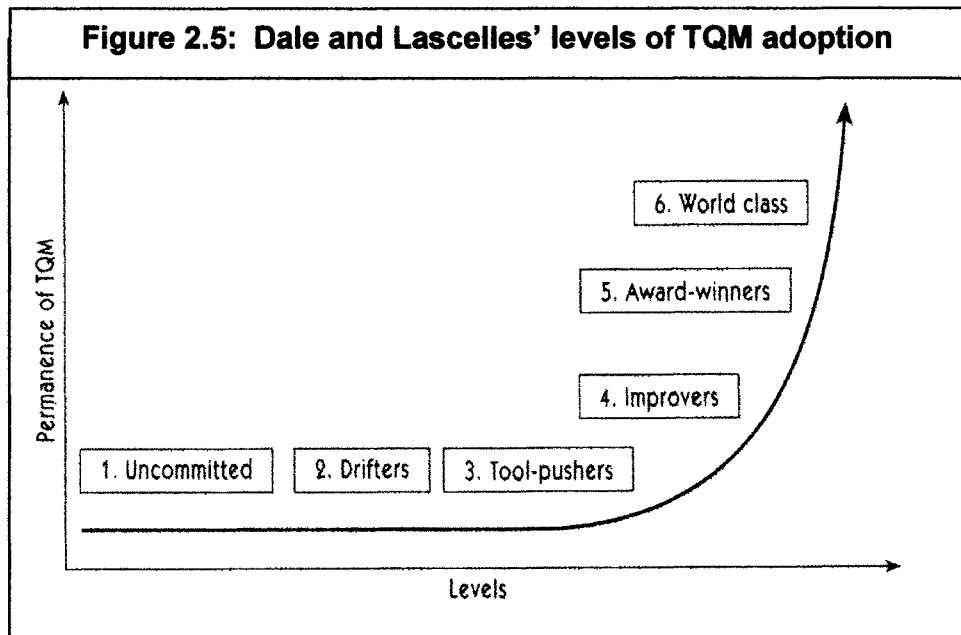
There has been much talk about empowerment... considerable training in analytical methods [and] efforts here and there to form work teams... [but the] approach of most Western firms has been schizophrenic... juxtaposing downsizing of the work force alongside the efforts to nurture it... downsizing has been gaining momentum as the dominant of the two approaches, as if many firms were in a final rush to divest themselves of any possible ‘fat’, whatever the consequences... the impact on worries about worker morale have apparently been pushed aside by the preoccupation with cost reduction... they have returned completely and comfortably to their intellectual heritage, which, outdated and inappropriate, sees the goal of ‘lean and mean’ achieved through a diet regime. This is a prescription for certain failure in a market environment where competitors will have become ‘lean and mean’ through exercise.

(Cole & Mogab, 1995, p.2)

Several authors have suggested that organisations might progress through a series of stages, or levels, of implementation of business excellence. Crosby (1979, pp. 25-40) describes a “quality management maturity grid”; Hermel & Ramis-Pujol (2003, p. 242) suggest that there are 5 levels in the evolution of excellence. Sandholm (1999, pp. 438-439) describes five stages of quality culture:

- ❑ Dormant: “...things are fine as they are...”
- ❑ Awakening: “...a more or less rude awakening...” that things have to change
- ❑ Groping: “...something has to be done, the question is what... a tendency to have a go with whatever happens to be the latest fad in management magazines...”
- ❑ Action: “...Gradually it dawns that the input applied in the form of trendy methods and approaches has only generated marginal results...” and a more “strategic” approach is called for and planned
- ❑ Maturity: “...quality... is integrated into everything that is done in the organization... One might not even use the word quality... [it] is something completely natural, as natural as finance has been for years.”

Dale and Lascelles (2003, pp. 97-110) describe six levels of TQM adoption (“or lack of it”), as illustrated in Figure 2.5. The authors suggest (p. 97) that these levels are not necessarily stages through which organisations pass on their TQM journey, but are characteristics and behaviours that organisations display at points in time: “... a useful way of characterizing organizations and helping them to recognize symptoms and develop plans for the future... [and] useful in helping to understand how people from a variety of hierarchical levels view the organization’s TQM maturity”



Source: Dale and Lascelles (2003)

Levels 3, 4 and 5 are of particular interest in this research. Dale and Lascelles (pp. 103-105) describe “tool-pushers” as organisations that employ a selection of quality management tools and techniques, but are not yet deriving the full potential benefits: “It is not uncommon to find that training on tools and techniques has been aimed at individuals who cannot propagate their further use and application, hence the knowledge is contained.” Not all members of the senior management team are committed to tqm, and there remains a tendency to delegate tqm responsibilities to a quality department; who, in turn, are looking to the criteria of the Baldrige Framework or the EFQM Excellence Model to help senior management to understand what is involved in tqm, and to provide direction and structure for their improvement process, with the quantitative assessment of progress being perceived as of particular benefit.

[Tool-pushers] are forever looking for the latest panacea, for a ‘quick fix’. This has happened with quality circles, SPC, FMEA, design of experiments, QFD and benchmarking. The excellence models and BPR are now being used in this way by many organizations... There are repeated claims from some parts of the organization that TQM is not working, with a tendency to dwell on old practices as being more effective.

Chapter 2 Literature review

Dale and Lascelles suggest that tool-pushers find it very difficult to sustain the momentum of their improvement initiatives, and "...often replace those quality management tools and techniques which have been found to require considerable effort and disciplined action to make them work."

"Improvers" (pp. 105-106) are organisations that have typically been engaged in continuous improvement for between three and eight years, and have made important advances, including developing an understanding that tqm involves cultural change. They are characterised by customer-focused continuous improvement, a commitment to tqm at senior management level, and to long-term and widespread education and training; and by trust, a focus on error-prevention and employee involvement:

A 'leadership' culture is starting to emerge, with some strong quality improvement champions... The preoccupation with 'numbers' is less marked than with 'drifters' or 'tool-pushers'... [and] The 'hype' which is usually associated with TQM is replaced by an acceptance of good management principle and practice.

Dale and Lascelles note that, in level 4 organisations ("improvers"), tqm remains dependent on a small number of key individuals to sustain the energy and direction of the improvement strategy. "There is a danger of lost momentum and failure to 'hold the gains' if key managers or directors leave... or organizational restructuring takes place..." Improvers are moving in the right direction and have made substantial progress, but still have some distance to go. Improvement is not yet self-sustaining:

The results of improvement projects are not all effectively utilized for improvements and such initiatives are heavily dependent upon the individuals driving them... it is unlikely that the kind of cross-functional culture required to move up to level 5 will emerge in less than 5 years; it is more likely to take around 10 years.

Despite the "award-winners" label, Dale and Lascelles clarify that not all organisations reaching "level 5" have actually won national or international quality awards, "...but they have reached a point in their TQM maturity where the kind of culture, values, trust,

capabilities, relationship and employee involvement in their business required to win such an award have been developed...”; continuous improvement is truly embedded and “total”. They suggest that organisations at this level may well be practising tqm principles without labeling them as “tqm”; “To them, such principles are just about effective management.” Characteristics include a leadership culture throughout the organisation that is not dependent on the commitment and drive of a limited number of individuals, with all employees being involved in improvement; powers of decision-making relinquished by management; and tqm being viewed sincerely by all managers and employees as a way of managing to delight internal and external customers (Dale & Lascelles, 2003, pp. 107-108).

More style than substance? Critiques of business excellence

Reavill (1999) bemoans the prevalence of “management fads”, of which he says there have been many since 1960. “It is even sometimes suggested... that managers would better go ‘back to basics’ and try to perform the most significant elements of management better, rather than chase each new cure-all managerial innovation.” (p. 292). He cites Mintzberg (1983) warning about the vagaries of managerial fashion; and Whistler (1975), who suggested (in the mid 1970s) that “There is still money to be made, and notoriety to be gained, in peddling universal prescriptions... the demand is still there, in the form of executives who seek the gospel, the simple truth, the one best way.”

In a much later paper, called “Managing quietly”, Mintzberg (1999) continues to denigrate the “hype” that is commonplace in management texts. He quotes from the book “Reengineering the Corporation” (while carefully avoiding naming its authors, Hammer and Champy (1993)):

Forget what you know about how business should work – most of it is wrong!’ screams the cover of that book... Just like that. ‘Business reengineering means putting aside much of the received wisdom of two hundred years of industrial management,’ say the authors. Never mind that Henry Ford and Frederick Taylor, to name just two, ‘reengineered’ business nearly a century ago. The new brand of reengineering ‘is to the next revolution of business what specialization of labour was to the last’ (meaning the industrial revolution). Are we so numbed by the hype of management that we accept such overstatement as normal? (p. 2)

Mintzberg is quite scathing about many of the “noisy words in the field of management”, pointing out that there is no shortage of them. He argues, for instance, that organisations that genuinely have empowerment do not waste their time or breath talking about it, whereas those that feel the need to talk about it “...generally lack it: they have been spending too much of their past disempowering everybody.” (p. 2); and describes “Change management” as “...the ultimate in managerial noise... All part of today’s *managerial correctness*, which, in its mindlessness, puts political correctness to shame.” (Mintzberg, 1999, p. 2)

Schneider (2002), takes a cynical view of management “solutions”, poking fun at well-known acronyms by coining new versions, including “sick sigma”, “sort parts continually” and “junk in trailer.”⁹ Collins (2000) approaches the subject from what he calls a “critical-practical perspective”, undertaking a sophisticated analysis of “Management Fads and Buzzwords”, including “tqm” and “excellence”, among others. He suggests (p. 4) that:

Management’s fads and buzzwords do not fall like rain... They are *created* and disseminated by groups of people working within an apparatus, which has grown to be an industry in itself... whose core business... [after Crainer (1998)] lies... in the fields of media and entertainment... a fashion-setting community... who have become known as ‘gurus’.

Collins (2000, p. 5) reflects on Micklethwait and Wooldridge’s (1997) observation “that many use the term ‘guru’ to describe management’s key commentators, only because they are too mannerly to call these people ‘charlatans’ in public”; commenting that he (Collins) regards this as a little harsh:

The ‘gurus’ of management are not (necessarily) charlatans. They may well... offer limited accounts of social action at work, and spuriously practical advice on managing and changing organizations, but they do not, I believe, set out to deceive. If they misrepresent their wares, or their capabilities, they do not do so knowingly.

Collins’ (2000, pp. 174-212) analysis of tqm itself is critical on a number of fronts:

[tqm] has attracted many devotees. Many commentaries... have sought to encourage managers to change their organizational policies and infrastructures... Yet, much of this advice/exhortation is glib because it has been couched in a ‘grammar’ of imperatives... the commentaries... do little to inform action because they tend to obscure questions of a social and political nature. Arguably... the ‘guru’ discussions of quality fail to analyse those aspects of organization which should be central to the analysis of change management.

⁹ The “original” versions of these acronyms are “six sigma”, “statistical process control” and “just in time”.

Gill and Whittle's (1992) critical analysis, "Management by panacea: accounting for transience", likens the rise of tqm to forerunners such as "Management by Objectives" and "Organization Development": "...the current managerial fashion of TQM seems depressingly familiar... and revives memories of the ephemeral nature of other lucrative consultant-driven packages." (p. 281). They suggest that "panaceas" follow a predictable life cycle (p. 289), which they describe in four phases, each lasting about 10 years:

- ❑ Birth - the inventor/charismatic leader writes seminal books
- ❑ Adolescence - consultants/senior managers promote the packaged intervention
- ❑ Maturity - routinized/bureaucratized by consultants and internal staff; user 'how to' manuals are a characteristic
- ❑ Decline - costs exceed apparent benefits; substitutes and/or the next panacea appears

Gill and Whittle conclude (pp. 290-292) that "the cyclical and non-cumulative nature of much of what passes for consulting approaches to organizational change" may be explained by factors "rooted in cultural and psychodynamic phenomena"; drawing on Bion (1961) and Kets de Vries and Miller (1984) to explore the "basic assumptions" that groups of people develop. They liken the life cycle of a panacea to that of dependency, in which the group "...searches for an all-powerful, all-knowing leader (which may be a person or... an idea) on which it can rely"; or, alternatively, to "pairing", whereby the group believes that its survival depends upon producing a new leader (person or idea) to deliver the group from its present difficulties. "While these... basic assumptions... serve some of the needs of group members, they can adversely affect the organization's functioning." Gill and Whittle cite Kets de Vries and Miller, describing pairing (or "utopian") groups, which hope that sometime in the future a person or idea will emerge which will provide salvation:

The feelings thus associated in the pairing group are at the opposite pole to feelings of hatred, destructiveness, and despair. For the feelings of hope to be sustained it is essential that the emphasis on packaged, ready-to-use techniques will find a bountiful market among firms that seek out utopian structures... in such circumstances we see companies drifting from one panacea to the next, paving the way to floundering and failure.

(Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984, p. 68).

Sandholm (1999, p. 437), too, recognises the apparent transience of the various approaches, suggesting that we have seen many trendy approaches in the quality field over the years. He lists quality circles, “zero defects” programs, ISO9000, tqm, benchmarking, business process reengineering and balanced scorecard, and implies that he could have added to this list:

Some have faded away, some will do... There is nothing wrong with these trendy methods and tools as such. The fault lies in how they are implemented. They are, in the West, often used as general methods and tools for improvements and, used in this manner, lead to marginal results. They ought to be used when an analysis indicates that they are the appropriate measures to eliminate specific problems or to better meet the needs of customers.

(Sandholm, 1999, p. 438).

Some authors would take issue with Sandholm’s suggestion that there is nothing wrong with the methods and tools as such. Wilkinson, Godfrey and Marchington (1997, p. 799), for example, have challenged the apparently widespread belief that tqm is unequivocally good, suggesting that:

There is a basic ambiguity in Total Quality Management (TQM) in that, while managers seek the commitment and co-operation of their employees, increased control over work is a cornerstone of TQM. This ambiguity is reflected in the literature... Its advocates see it as universally beneficial, improving competitive advantage and, at the same time, ‘empowering’ the workforce by delegating responsibility to those actually carrying out the task. This increased responsibility is thought to foster pride, job satisfaction and better work... Its critics, however, point to the tighter managerial control involved in the drive to reduce variance... and the increased surveillance arising out of the quality measurement systems introduced... From this latter perspective, TQM is seen as another development in the capitalist labour process intended to push back the frontiers of control and so intensify work.

They contrast the conclusions arising from these two different perspectives, as illustrated in Table 2.5.

Table 2.5: The contrasting perspectives of TQM

Bouquets	Brickbats
Education	Indoctrination
Empowerment	Emasculation
Liberating	Controlling
Delaying	Intensification
Teamwork	Peer group pressure
Responsibility	Surveillance
Post-Fordism	Neo-Fordism
Blame free culture	Identification of errors
Commitment	Compliance

Source: Wilkinson *et al.* (1997, p. 800)). The “bouquets” are attributed to “the success story portrayed by Wickens (1987), the Personnel Director at Nissan (UK)”; and the “brickbats” to “the strong critique of the same factory by Garrahan and Stewart (1992).”

Wilkinson *et al.* (1997, p. 814) conclude that:

To its advocates, TQM is unequivocally good and beneficial to all parties involved, and deservedly attracts bouquets and universal acclaim. Alternatively, from a labour-process perspective, it represents an intensification of work, shifting the frontier of control firmly in management’s favour. The problem is that each of these perspectives is blinkered and the reality is more dependent on local circumstances and motives than either argument would suggest. While it might be reassuring to shower TQM with bouquets, this ignores the unitarist perspective and managerial nature of employee involvement under TQM. At the same time, whilst academic credibility may be enhanced by hurling brickbats, TQM can offer greater job satisfaction and is, generally, greeted positively by employees and shop stewards... Quality management is implemented in a variety of versions, displaying several faces, and employee involvement under TQM is multi-dimensional with reality often obscured by rhetoric and jargon. While it is always possible to provide findings to support a theory, a broader perspective gives a more complete picture where people may be working harder but also enjoying greater job satisfaction. There is a need to remove blinkers and put TQM initiatives into the context of each organisation, studying not only the market situation, the industrial relations history and the HR practices used, but also how ‘quality’ is understood and used by all the parties involved.

Benchmarking: approaches, techniques and roles

The quality-focused academic community has devoted considerable attention to the subject of “benchmarking”, with an emphasis on presentation of case studies and models. Many and varied definitions of “benchmarking” have been suggested, three oft-quoted examples being:

- ❑ The search for and implementation of best practices (Camp, 1995)
- ❑ A continuous, systematic process for evaluating the products, services, and work processes of organisations that are recognised as representing best practices for the purpose of organisational improvement (Spendolini, 1992)
- ❑ The continuous process of measuring products, services, and processes against the strongest competitors or those renowned as leaders in their field (Zairi & Leonard, 1994)

Benchmarking has roots in the ideas of Taylor and the founders of modern quality management (Watson, 1993; Appleby, Yarrow, Friedewald, & Prabhu, 1999), as well as in reverse engineering, competitive analysis and performance measurement (Zairi & Leonard, 1994; Bendell, Kelly, Merry, & Sims, 1993). One of the leading advocates describes its purpose as “...to break the paradigm of not being able to learn from others.” (Camp, 1995, p. 14). Another argues that benchmarking is more than a tool, since:

... the impact of its application is more for changing attitudes and behaviours and raising commitment through better education, awareness and inspiration from model companies. Benchmarking is perhaps the best means for servicing the human asset by continuously supplying new ideas to sustain superior performance levels” (Zairi, 1998, p. 44).

Bendell, Boulter and Kelly (1993, p. 1) suggested in 1993 that benchmarking had become a vogue term of the 1990s, and asked “...should it be? Is it just another management fad? The latest fashion? Or does it represent both an evolution and a revolution in management thinking?” They acknowledged difficulties in defining the term, suggesting that benchmarking means different things to different people, but reported that a “benchmarking

boom” was underway, featuring an “explosion” of magazine articles, conferences and training programmes, and high and rapidly growing levels of benchmarking activity in business sectors. “Various commentators” had pointed out that there was a natural evolution towards benchmarking from concepts and practices that were already widely used, such as competitor and market analysis, quality improvement programmes, performance measurement and “Japanese practices.” Bendell *et al.* pinpoint a trigger to the popularity of benchmarking in visits made by “...the Japanese [to] thousands of companies around the world... specifically to absorb ideas that they could adopt, adapt and improve upon throughout manufacturing processes” ; and another in the activities of Xerox in the late 1970s and 1980s:

When the Xerox Corporation in America adopted a similar vigorous approach in 1979, motivated by a rapidly diminishing market share, the birth of benchmarking as we know it today had taken place. Xerox felt they had no choice... competitors were able to sell products more cheaply than Xerox could make them. To understand why this was, the product features and performance capabilities of competitive machines were rigorously evaluated and Xerox was also able to investigate the practices of Fuji Xerox in Japan. The improvement opportunities that were identified and put into place resulted in a swift turnaround for Xerox’s fortunes and led to Best Practice Benchmarking becoming a central part of their business strategy. Today, Xerox and Rank Xerox Limited... are generally recognised as the leaders in the Benchmarking field in the Western hemisphere. (Bendell *et al.*, 1993, p. 3)

Bendell *et al.* suggest that this lead provided by Xerox triggered benchmarking’s subsequent popularity, and led to its adoption as a qualifying condition for America’s Malcolm Baldrige Award for Quality and as a criterion in the European Quality Award. In turn, the emphasis within these two “prestigious” awards upon benchmarking was fuelling the continuing growth in its popularity.

A substantial body of literature has developed, much of it written by quality professionals for fellow quality professionals and practising managers, with emphasis on a practical “how to do it” approach to benchmarking. Zairi (1998, p. 1) comments that:

The market is flooded with textbooks on the theory of benchmarking. Nearly all the texts written so far... tend to describe:

- ❑ What benchmarking is
- ❑ Its origins
- ❑ The benchmarking process covered step by step

The two major issues that have not been addressed effectively relate to:

- ❑ How can benchmarking be applied in a variety of scenarios?
- ❑ Where are real examples of effective applications?

Zairi (p. 2) expresses pleasure at the emergence of some published work which no longer refers to benchmarking “as a mechanistic tool based on... a series of *Steps*”, citing Karlof and Ostblom (1993) who have coined the term “benchlearning.” Zairi reinforces the point:

Indeed, the essence of benchmarking is to encourage continuous learning and to lift organizations to higher competitive levels. Through problem-solving, the acquisition of internal and external knowledge and its effective implementation, standards of practice can be enhanced with the direct effect of achieving higher levels of customer satisfaction and, as a consequence, business performance can also be greatly improved. (Zairi, 1998, p. 2)

Like Zairi, Friedewald (2001) concludes that most of the work to date has been aimed at the practitioner market, with limited evidence of research methodology apparent. Yasin (2002), too, notes the preponderance of publications in “practitioner-type journals”, and pinpoints two areas in which there is very little published work: evaluation of benchmarking initiatives; and papers that focus on benchmarking in the public sector.

Dattakumar and Jagadeesh (2003) review five earlier reviews of the benchmarking literature (Jackson, Safford, & Swart, 1994; Zairi & Youssef, 1995, 1996; Vig, 1995; Dorsch & Yasin, 1998; Yasin, 2002), and report the results of their own extensive, if somewhat uncritical, review; identifying “more than 350 publications by June 2002” - these are all journal and conference papers (the review does not include books or other publications such as magazine articles or editorials). The authors identify that 88% of published papers have focused on “Benchmarking: general/fundamentals/models” or “Specific applications/case studies”; the remainder being “innovations and extensions” and benchmarking papers focused on the education sector (a particular interest of the authors). Publishing activity seems to have peaked in the first half of the 1990s, and by 2000 had declined to approximately 30 new papers per year, with an emphasis on specific applications and case studies.

Dattakumar and Jagadeesh identify some recent new developments in the field, including:

- ❑ an application of benchmarking in analysing how organisations seek to incorporate various knowledge management approaches into their business (O'Dell, Wiig, & Odem, 1999)
- ❑ the use of benefit curves for benchmarking processes (Fuller, 2000)
- ❑ uses of uncertainty modelling as a component of benchmarking (Featherman, 2000)
- ❑ the competitive analysis model, a new approach to strategic benchmarking of small firms (McNamee & Greenan, 1999)
- ❑ the use of geometrical equations for analysis of benchmarking data (Talluri & Sarkis, 2001)

The authors conclude that:

There is a proliferation of literature on the topic of benchmarking in the last 15 years... [the] technique has seen a steady growth and appears to be heading towards maturity level... several aspects of benchmarking, along with many interesting and diversified applications, have been covered in sufficient detail. (Dattakumar & Jagadeesh, 2003, p. 191)

They identify (Dattakumar and Jagadeesh, 2003, p. 191-192) “certain issues which have not been satisfactorily addressed or not been addressed at all”:

- ❑ *Cost aspects of benchmarking.* The overall cost incurred in carrying out a benchmarking exercise needs to be established, say in terms of cost models or cost equations. This would enable the decision makers to decide upon financial commitment before embarking on the benchmarking exercise. Further it would allow [people] to estimate the return on investment, and to convince the top management. While a precise model is difficult, because of variability of factors involved, an approximate method would be quite useful.
- ❑ *Duration of benchmarking exercise.* Guidelines regarding setting up of a timeframe for conducting benchmarking are not available. If a method can be described to decide upon the total time involved in benchmarking exercises, it would prove very helpful in setting targets and deadlines.
- ❑ *Human resources in benchmarking activities.* Rationale behind formation of cross-functional benchmarking teams, identification of tasks of benchmarking teams, and responsibility sharing among benchmarking teams, have not been discussed in enough detail. The human role in benchmarking activities needs to be clarified in complete depth to ensure better teamwork in a benchmarking project.
- ❑ *Selecting benchmarking partner.* Selection of partner or superior performer, their duties and responsibilities, legal and business aspects are to be further elaborated.

What Dattakumar and Jagadeesh do not point out, but appears clear from their review, is that the literature’s emphasis leans heavily towards business process benchmarking, rather than other forms; and that there is little or no published work which provides in-depth analysis of *how* benchmarking operates in practice, as opposed to how it is supposed to work in theory.

Friedewald (2001) is rather more critical of the benchmarking literature in this respect, describing it as “relatively devoid of academic theory.” (p. 65). He reviews (pp. 99-111) the available evidence regarding the popularity and deployment of benchmarking, focusing

particularly on a number of surveys (Coopers & Lybrand, 1994; American Productivity and Quality Centre, 1993) and case studies (DTI, 1998; Zairi & Leonard, 1994; Watson, 1993; American Productivity and Quality Centre, 1993) and notes claims that 95% of American companies and 78% of British companies were “using benchmarking.” Friedewald suggests that there are some major potential weaknesses and biases in the surveys, including sample bias and imprecise definitions of “benchmarking”, and highlights reservations amongst “experts” (Watson, 1993; Chase, 1995; Council for Continuous Improvement, 1993) about the claims of very high adoption of benchmarking. Friedewald concludes that most benchmarking activity, except in the most quality mature organisations, tends to focus on metrics and/or closely resembles “industrial tourism”; and to be aimed towards product and service comparisons, or high-level financial and non-financial performance measures:

The business processes that underlie these measures and help deliver the products/services, which deliver satisfaction to the customer, are likely to be ignored or poorly understood... Most comparisons will be confined to competitive and industry boundaries... reducing the likelihood of breakthrough learning occurring. (Friedewald, 2001, p. 112)

Jarrar and Zairi (2000; 2001) report the results of a survey of 227 organisations from 32 different countries, which provides a more recent indication of the extent and nature of benchmarking activity. The survey targeted organisations that were already involved in benchmarking activities (the respondents were all members of The Benchmarking Exchange or The Benchmarking Centre, or subscribers to *Benchmarking: An International Journal*), and therefore the results can not be taken as an indication of activity levels in the general corporate population. Jarrar and Zairi conclude (p. 245) that benchmarking activity is widespread across geographical and sectoral boundaries, and that “More and more companies seem to be adopting this powerful concept.” They highlight the high level of agreement among respondents that process-owner involvement is important to successful transfer, and a relatively low prevalence of cost-benefit analysis (in advance) or post-implementation evaluation (“49% do not have any formal process for this purpose, and 10% do not even do it”).

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Jarrar and Zairi (2000, pp. 240-241) acknowledge that the process of identifying and transferring practices is “trickier and more time consuming than most people imagine”, and identify (citing Ashton, 1998; American Productivity and Quality Centre, 1997) a number of inhibitors and barriers:

- ❑ Top management’s failure to signal their importance
- ❑ Little shared understanding of best practices
- ❑ A non-standardised best practices process
- ❑ Organisation structures that promote ‘silo thinking’
- ❑ A culture which values personal expertise and knowledge creation over sharing
- ❑ Lack of contact and information exchange
- ❑ Over-reliance on transmitting explicit rather than tacit information
- ❑ Lack of time
- ❑ Employees and managers not being accustomed to seeking or sharing knowledge
- ❑ People not being fully aware of the knowledge they hold

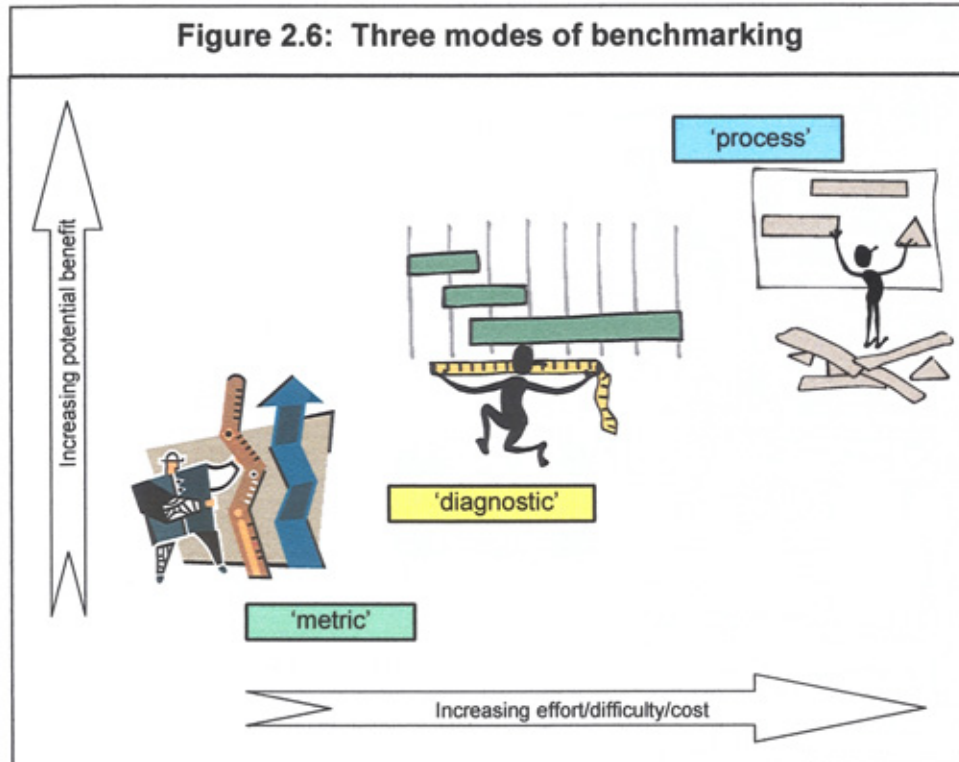
Codling (2002) reports the results of a survey amongst UK managers in 2002. Acknowledging (p. 5) that the methodology may have produced skewed findings (the survey was distributed only to members of The Benchmarking Centre), he reports that 80% of respondents stated that they were currently using “performance benchmarking or comparative analysis”, while 57% were using “process benchmarking”. Rigby (2001) reports the results of a “management tools survey” conducted by Bain & Company, with “451 senior executives from around the world” as respondents; “The survey examined usage, satisfaction and effectiveness, across more than 30 industries, of 25 management tools widely used in 2000.” “Benchmarking” was rated third of 25 in terms of usage, with 69% of respondents stating that they use this “tool”; but was only “average” among the 25 tools in terms of “tool satisfaction rates” (scoring 3.89 out of 5 on this scale).

A scan of benchmarking literature and activities soon makes it clear that the term “benchmarking” is commonly used to describe several quite different types of activity. Numerous “types” of benchmarking are identified in the literature; Friedewald (2001, pp. 77-78) summarises benchmarking types defined by eleven different authors (Camp, 1989;

Zairi & Leonard, 1994; American Productivity and Quality Centre, 1993; Bendell *et al.*, 1993; Spendolini, 1992; Codling, 2002; Watson, 1992; Boxwell, 1994; Schmidt, 1992; Cecil & Ferraro, 1992; Shetty, 1993) identifying some degree of consensus that distinctions can be drawn between four broad types, all of which are variants of a what Camp (1995) calls “business process benchmarking”:

- “Internal benchmarking”: comparing products/services, performance measures and processes between departments/sites/divisions of the same organisation
- “Competitive benchmarking”: comparing products/services, performance measures and processes between an organisation and its direct competitors
- “Functional benchmarking”: comparing functional business processes against “best in industry” or “best in class”
- “Generic benchmarking”: comparing generic business processes against “best in industry” or “best in class”

These same four types are described by Jarrar and Zairi (2003, p. 2), who add a fifth type called “metric benchmarking”, which is concerned with comparisons of performance data. In my own work with colleagues, (see for example Yarrow, Appleby, & Allen, 1999; Appleby, 1999; Yarrow, 1999) we have developed a simple explanatory model which is useful to distinguish between what we see as three quite different modes of benchmarking: “metric”, “diagnostic” and “(business) process” benchmarking, as illustrated in figure 2.6.



Source: Yarrow, Appleby & Allen (1999)

The three types are described in Yarrow *et al.*, (1999, pp. 1-2):

Much 'benchmarking' activity concerns comparisons of performance data. We would label this as *Metric benchmarking*. A good example is the data presented in "Manufacturing Winners" (DTI et al, 1995), based upon the 1994 "Best Factory Awards". So long as we are sure that we are comparing 'apples with apples', it can serve a useful purpose as a 'call to action'. However, its emphasis is very much on the 'what' rather than the 'how'. Metric benchmarking can help an organisation to pinpoint aspects of performance that need to improve, but on its own it can not help them to learn *how* to improve.

Another mode, less common but with great potential if correctly applied, involves two or more organisations comparing their practices in a specific area of activity, in great depth, to learn from one another *how* better results can be achieved. This is *Process benchmarking*, and it is very fully described in the literature (for example Camp, 1995; Zairi, 1992). In our experience, this mode of benchmarking offers the greatest potential benefits in the long run, but is difficult and expensive, and only a minority of those who have set out to do it have fully capitalised upon that potential.

A third mode is labelled *Diagnostic benchmarking* - PILOT and PROBE are examples. It seeks to explore both practices and performance, establishing not only which of the company's results areas are relatively weak, but also which areas of practice exhibit room for improvement. While Process benchmarking is in itself an improvement technique, Diagnostic benchmarking is more akin to a 'health check' for the company, helping to identify which practices need to be changed, and the nature and extent of performance improvements which should follow.

Matykiewicz and Lumsden (2002) identify 39 different tools that could be broadly classified under the heading "diagnostic benchmarking", and propose a "maturity filter" approach to selecting the most suitable tool for a particular organisation at a particular point in time. Voss, Ahlstrom and Blackmon (1998) investigate the contribution of diagnostic benchmarking to manufacturing improvement, and Skandalakis and Nelder (2001) report efforts to make diagnostic benchmarking accessible to small and medium-sized manufacturing enterprises.

A well known example of "metric benchmarking" is contained in the book "The Machine that Changed the World" (Womack, Jones, & Roos, 1990), which brought the principles of "lean production" to the world's notice, presenting stark comparisons between automobile plants as an illustration of the effectiveness of the "lean" principles being applied by some (Japanese) manufacturers. An example of the comparative data presented in this book is shown in Table 2.6.

**TABLE 2.6: “Metric benchmarking”: an example from the book
*The Machine that Changed the World***

	GM Framingham (U.S.A.)	Toyota Takaoka (Japan)
Gross Assembly Hours per Car	40.7	18.0
Adjusted Assembly Hours per Car	31	16
Assembly Defects per 100 cars	130	45
Assembly Space per Car (Square feet per vehicle per year, adjusted for car size)	8.1	4.8
Inventories of Parts (average for major parts)	2 weeks	2 hours

Note: Gross assembly hours per car are calculated by dividing hours of effort in the plant by the total number of cars produced. Adjusted assembly hours incorporate adjustments for standard activities and product attributes.

Source: Womack, Jones & Roos, 1990: p. 81

Delbridge, Lowe and Oliver (1995) review “The process of benchmarking”, concluding that “...the generation of systematic and comparable performance data across manufacturing plants represents a significant challenge, yet it can be achieved.” Writing in 1995, they describe “benchmarking” as a current buzzword, pointing out that up to 1990 there were fewer than 20 articles published about the subject, mostly describing work and experiences at the Xerox Corporation “... whose activities have been highly significant in bringing widespread attention to benchmarking.” Their analysis highlights the diagnostic role of some benchmarking approaches:

Most benchmarking studies focus their attention on the level of the firm and, more typically, individual manufacturing sites. In doing so, such studies tacitly emphasize *management practices* as the explanation of performance and hence as a primary route to improvement. In doing so, other factors relevant to competitiveness, such as national economic policies, are implicitly ignored. An example of this is to be found in one of the best known benchmarking studies, namely the 1985-1990 International Motor Vehicle Programme (IMVP) which systematically compared the performance of car assembly plants and was written up in *The Machine that Changed the World...* An important element in benchmarking studies is a diagnosis of the areas of weakness in order to identify potentially fruitful improvement activities. Many studies which identify performance differentials also offer explanations of these differentials.

The authors point out that benchmarking studies of organisational units have the potential for driving change because they can indicate that superior performance levels are achievable, hence discrediting arguments that “it can’t be done”; and because they cultivate pressure for change on the grounds that higher performing organisations are likely to survive while low performing ones will not. Critics of this sort of study, however, argue that such explanations of comparative performance success or failure are grounded in a perspective which inflates the importance of some factors and ignores others. Delbridge *et al.* (1995) cite Williams and Haslam (1992):

An unconscious politics of managerialism runs through the text: at every stage [in *The Machine that Changed the World*] the company is the unit of analysis, and the world is

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divided into good companies and bad companies with managers as the privileged agents of change who can turn bad companies into good companies.

(Delbridge *et al.*, 1995, p. 322)

Simpson and Kondouli (2000) present three case studies featuring diagnostic and process benchmarking techniques, concluding that benchmarking is a highly effective technique for improving organisational performance. Dervitsiotis (2000) broadly concurs, but sounds a warning note that potential adopters must be aware of the limitations of benchmarking, an aspect which Hequet (1993) also explores:

How can you possibly go wrong modeling yourself after the best? Well, you can. The practice of benchmarking had scarcely taken its place in the pantheon of sacred quality techniques when heresy flared: Measuring yourself against world-class companies doesn't always help.

(Hequet, 1993, p. 36)

Hequet warns that (p. 38) lack of preparation "back home" can render benchmarking comparisons ineffective; (p. 39) that lower-performing organisations can get overwhelmed when they try to benchmark against "the best"; (p. 41) that "Not every benchmarking act will be successful... you will go to find something at a company touted as having a good process and... find nothing of value"; and (p. 41) that benchmarking is not for everyone: "...not for every stage of growth and maturity."

Assessing excellence: models and methods of organisational assessment and diagnostic benchmarking

Despite the impressive volume of published work about “benchmarking”, relatively little has been published specifically about the variant called “diagnostic benchmarking”; and within the published work that does exist, there is little that applies thorough, transparent research methodologies to the exploration of *how* diagnostic benchmarking operates, or the *role* that it plays - as opposed to publications featuring sectoral or geographical analyses of patterns of practice and performance based on diagnostic benchmarking outputs; or case studies of organisational improvements in which it apparently played a part, but which appear to accept that it did play a role at face value without challenge or exploration; or descriptions of tools and how to use them, with exhortations to do so.

The volume of relevant literature can be increased somewhat by broadening its scope to include not only publications that refer specifically to “diagnostic benchmarking” (or another similar name for this mode of benchmarking); but also those that describe and analyse the processes of “assessment” based on one of the “models of excellence” (such as the EFQM Excellence Model or the Baldrige Framework). One can argue that “diagnostic benchmarking” is a variant of these fairly popular processes of “assessment”, perhaps particularly “self-assessment”. To my mind, these approaches are so similar that in effect they are different names for the same activity; the distinction, if there is one, might be that during “benchmarking” per se the organisation compares its practices and performance not only with a model of excellence but also with the extent to which others achieve the standards that model describes. Some approaches to using excellence models invite users to compare their “enablers” and “results” only against the concepts and standards encapsulated in “the model”; others use “the model” as a medium through which the user compares both with the elements of the model and with standards achieved by other organisations. In the context of this research, any such distinction is a detail that will not be allowed to prevent the research from encompassing the full range of variants of this type of assessment (or benchmark); my intention in using the term “diagnostic benchmarking” is to encompass the full range of “diagnostic” “benchmarking tools” and approaches, including those that might commonly be regarded as “business excellence model-based assessments.”

The process of self-assessment, in the context of business excellence, dates back to the birth of Japan's Deming Prize in the 1950s (Porter & Tanner, 2004, p. 184). Its broader popularity awaited America (Baldrige Framework) and Europe (EFQM Model) introducing models of excellence, in 1987 and 1989. These models are the basis of annual awards processes (regional, national and international), and are widely used by organisations for self-assessment. Porter and Tanner (2004, p. 9) report that "Thousands of organisations across the world now use self-assessment on a regular basis. Self-assessment is not only a means of measuring continuous improvement, it also provides an excellent opportunity for integrating business or organizational excellence into normal business activity."

Dale and Smith (1997) explore the history of diagnostic aids, suggesting that "Perhaps the first diagnostic aid in the area of quality management was Philip Crosby's (1979) Quality Management Maturity Grid" (Dale & Smith, 1997, p. 307), suggesting that this grid was ahead of its time and was not exploited to its full potential advantage: "As a consequence, the development of performance measurement with respect to quality management was given scant attention until the popularization of self-assessment." (p. 307). Other early examples include Marvin Weisbord's (1978) book "Organizational Diagnosis: a workbook of theory and practice", and Whickham Skinner's (1985) descriptors of the "factory of the future"; although it is arguable whether these were based on "quality" models as such.

Ishikawa and Lu (1985, pp. 185-196) describe a "quality control audit", suggesting that "In implementing quality control, one of the most important tasks is to monitor how well it is doing by asking the following questions: Is it conducted well or not? Where are its weaknesses?" (p. 186). The authors describe various modes of assessment used by Japanese companies, including the Deming Application Prize; and offer some advice:

Do not apply for the Deming Application Prize just for the sake of the prize. Apply for the purpose of promoting your TQC [Total Quality Control]. Do not promote TQC that is perfunctory or merely meant to look good on paper. Top management often does not know the true state of their company. When facts are reported, top management must not show anger towards subordinates.

(Ishikawa & Lu, 1985, p. 1985)

Cole (1999, pp. 185-191) cites Ishikawa's (1987) description of the Japanese quality diagnostic in his (Cole's) account of Hewlett Packard's development and widescale use of such a diagnostic, which began with the substantial consultancy support that HP received from 1985 until 1992 from Professor Noriaki Kano, himself a "disciple" of Kaoru Ishikawa (Cole, 1999, p. 184):

His [Kano's] typical workmode was to carry out diagnostic activities, asking key managers in a group setting about various aspects of their business practices and problem-solving activities, then making recommendations based on that information. He practiced a Socratic style as he pushed managers to reveal their underlying assumptions and practices and to show them their limitations.

HP's then Corporate Quality Director perceived benefits in Kano's work for the spread of tqc within the company, but encountered the limitation that "he was only one person, his time was limited, and HP was a big company." The challenge of capturing Kano's expertise and insights was met by a combination of "hoshin management" and the creation of a diagnostic tool, the "Quality Maturity System (QMS)", capable of being deployed by "a large number of ordinary managers. (Cole, 1999, p. 186). The QMS involved a two-day review during which division managers were asked a series of questions designed to assess the level of maturity of their quality system. Cole reports that it became an important and long-lasting component of HP's approach to total quality:

Kano came to believe that this [QMS] was a more robust approach than in Japan because it institutionalizes the review process, whereas in Japan, a shift to a new president can often lead to the quality improvement emphasis running out of steam (p. 186)... The QMS became the primary instrument through which HP routinely evaluated the quality system of many of its organisational units. In short, it came to provide an operational definition of quality that was consistent throughout the firm and provided opportunities for both coaching general managers on modes of improvement and self-assessing organizational capability. (p. 191)

Dale (1996) suggests that most organisations are keen to know what are the next steps that they need to take to progress and accelerate their improvement process. They usually want to identify what they are doing well, why it is working, and what needs to be improved; and this is why organisations turn to self-assessment. However, he suggests, some organisations are unaware of the existence of this quality-based self-assessment method; and others, particularly smaller organisations, are put off by their perception that such methods involve considerable effort. Dale's view is that, in any case, organisations need "some three years of TQM operating experience" before they are ready to make the best of self-assessment methods. He identifies five types of "TQM organizational characteristics" which:

...might be seen as a way of encouraging those less advanced organizations to take the next tentative steps along the TQM journey without, at this stage, resorting to self-assessment methods. However, in order to move to the more advanced organizational characteristics, self-assessment is a prerequisite.

(Dale, 1996, 28-29)

Diagnostic benchmarking tools are designed to assist managers and employees to review the practices that their organisation deploys, and the performance results it achieves, in order to identifying potential for improvements (Keegan, 1998; Yarrow, 1999; Matykiewicz, 2001) However, published work about diagnostic benchmarking is limited almost entirely to descriptive accounts and findings drawn from analysis of aggregate findings (Hanson, Voss, Blackmon, & Oak, 1994; Campbell-Hunt & Corbett, 1996; Hanson, Voss, Blackmon, & Claxton, 1996; CBI, 1997; Voss, Blackmon, Chase, Rose, & Roth, 1997a; Roth, Chase, & Voss, 1997; Voss, Blackmon, Cagliano, Hanson, & Wilson, 1998; Yarrow *et al.*, 1999; Knuckey *et al.*, 1999; Neely *et al.*, 2000; Knuckey *et al.*, 2002; Owen *et al.*, 2003). In terms of the findings and conclusions they have delivered, such outputs are generally regarded as credible and have been influential - for example, the "Made in" series of reports (Hanson *et al.*, 1994; Hanson *et al.*, 1996) led to the authors being consulted by a Government "Select Committee" on competitiveness, and their findings influenced the content of one of the first UK Government Competitiveness White Papers (DTI, 1998). These various reports that have arisen from diagnostic benchmarking activity have clearly had the potential to influence policy and strategy at national and sectoral levels, and may well have done so. There has been some exploration of whether

progress has been made (in terms of improved practices and performance) at aggregate level (for example, Yarrow, Hanson, & Robson, 2004). However, these publications have done little to explore the issue of whether and how the act of engaging in diagnostic benchmarking has enabled the many individual organisations which have participated to make progress on their own improvement journeys.

Keegan reports (2001, p. 97) that “Benchmarking has recently been identified as a key tool in the efforts of the European Community to address its competitiveness problems”, and that The European Commission “...[has] moved to facilitate the promotion of benchmarking across the European Community, with the goal of increasing its use and consequently improving overall performance.” He elaborates:

This high level of focus on the utility of benchmarking at enterprise level coincided with the development of two key SME benchmarking tools: the MICROSCOPE tool [a variant of PROBE] and the Benchmark Index tool. MICROSCOPE was developed as a largely qualitative tool, while the United Kingdom Department of Trade and Industry recently developed Index as a largely quantitative tool. This researcher was actively involved in the development of Microscope and was appointed to create and lead the European Benchmarking Forum, a key initiative of DG [Directorate General] Enterprise of the European Commission.

(Keegan, 2001, pp. 97-98).

Rohlfer (2004) has explored the role of public authorities in the UK and Germany in promoting and supporting benchmarking, and found diagnostic benchmarking tools and schemes to be prominent amongst their activities. She notes (p. 521) that “the management literature is full of prescriptive advice on the best ways in which firms can use benchmarking both to monitor their own performance and to learn from other companies”; and highlights a number of “key initiatives to promote company-level benchmarking in the UK and Germany.” (p. 527). The Germany Federal Government, Rohlfer reports (p. 528), supports benchmarking through its Ministries of Economics and Technology (BMWT) and of Education and Research (BMBF). BMWT’s emphasis is on benchmarking activities relating to framework conditions (the business environment); and BMBF supports benchmarking only in service sector firms, supporting individual projects defined by

institutions or businesses. The UK, in contrast, has in place a number of “best practice schemes and tools” (p. 527) intended to support the benchmarking activities of individual organisations across a wider spectrum. Rohlfer describes the main players and the main schemes:

- ❑ The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) manages “Benchmark Index”; “...which is delivered via intermediaries such as business links... a simple, computer-based system that, through a series of questions, allows companies to measure their performance against others in around 80 aspects of finance, management and business excellence”
- ❑ The BM Index is supported through two other support schemes, also backed by DTI: CONNECT, which “gives a broad introduction to best practice and benchmarking application through a series of CD-ROMs”; and IUKE (inside UK enterprise) which “offers visits to exemplar companies where people see a broad range of best practice in operation.”
- ❑ The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) hosted the “Fit for the Future” campaign; and “alongside this campaign has... a suite of four benchmarking tools under the name of PROMoting Business Excellence (PROBE) for helping member organizations to learn from each other. These tools utilise the methodology of a self-assessment questionnaire which is filled in by a cross-functional and multi-level team of the benchmarking company.”

Rohlfer (2004, p. 533) reproduces an explanation, from the CBI’s website, of the aim of the PROBE benchmarking scheme:

In a highly competitive business environment, it is essential for organizations to improve their performance in order to survive and grow... Best practices benchmarking will help measure your current performance level. Benchmarking will also help you identify operational strengths and areas for improvement. It will enable you to compare your organization with competitors and should be used as a strategic management tool on an ongoing basis to track performance gains. (CBI, 2001)

Wild and Prime (1997) provide a detailed description of the process through which a PROBE benchmark is completed, with an experienced facilitator (the authors both regularly operate in this role) guiding a “multi-functional, multi-level team of between six and ten employees” through the process of arriving at consensus and assigning scores to each of the tool’s scales. The facilitator inputs the agreed scores into the PROBE database and generates comparison data which forms the basis of a feedback and discussion session “...where the team can begin to develop an action plan for improvement.” (p. 16). Wild and Prime report that:

The clients who gain real advantage from PROBE are those who match these ideas against their existing improvement programmes, identify gaps to be filled and areas to be re-prioritised. The PROBE process frequently re-emphasises the importance of existing programmes, as well as the need for new initiatives. (Wild & Prime, 1997, pp. 16-17)

Between them, the Benchmark Index and PROBE schemes have enabled several thousand UK-based organisations (and others further afield) to benchmark their practices and performance. Many similar tools and schemes exist (Matykiewicz, 2001), albeit mostly operating on a smaller scale, and tending to be owned and promoted by commercial consultancies or by agencies with a specific (geographical, sectoral or functional) focus. Momentum has been maintained for over a decade partly by a number of investments of public money and endorsement, such as the promotion of self-assessment and benchmarking by the national Small Business Service (2001); by some Regional Development Agencies (ONENorthEast, 2001); by the British Quality Foundation (2006); and by the CBI (2001). International projects, funded (for example) by the European Union, the World Bank and the United Nations, have deployed diagnostic benchmarking in many countries (see for example Northumbria University HyLife/Business Excellence (2006) for links to international schemes and projects). Within the U.K., numerous initiatives have focused benchmarking efforts onto particular sectors and locales (for example Mann, 1998; Voss *et al.*, 1998; Yarrow, Mitchell, & Robson, 2000; Prabhu, Robson, Yarrow, Appleby, & Mitchell, 2000; Ford, 2003; PROBE Partnership, 2006).

The PROBE scheme is managed by “the PROBE Partnership”, of which the CBI is a member, along with London Business School, Northumbria University and a private sector consultancy called Comparison International Ltd. The Partnership’s website (PROBE Partnership, 2006) provides background information (summarised here because of its relevance to the case study which forms part of this PhD research):

The suite of tools collectively known as PROBE... has its roots in the ground-breaking research on world-class manufacturing undertaken by IBM(UK) and LBS in the early 1990s. Its impact has been profound and far-reaching, and has led to a series of developments which have adapted and deployed the PROBE methodology into a wide range of settings.

In aggregate, the datasets contain over 5000 individual site benchmarks from 32 countries, and their reach, size and richness continues to grow steadily. Variants of PROBE have been developed for large, medium/small and micro-sized businesses. The split into Manufacturing and Service has evolved to include variants for the Healthcare, Red Meat, Cereal and Learning and Skills sectors, and increasingly the ‘service’ tools are recognised for their applicability to businesses which make products and/or handle physical goods as well as those which ‘only’ deliver services. Tools which ‘drill down’ into People Management and Environment, Health & Safety are also available... As the PROBE suite has grown in its sophistication and reach, IBM and LBS have involved other partners and licensees around the world. The hub of the benchmarking activities is now the PROBE Partnership, comprising the original partners plus the CBI, Northumbria University and Comparison International Ltd... Conscious of the need to practice what they preach, the PROBE partners have supported the development of a specialist benchmarking consultancy providing professional, customer-focused support to the international network of partners and licensees who deploy the PROBE tools. Since 2000, Comparison International has played a key role in partnership development, licensing, training and accreditation and quality assuring benchmarking activities and the data they generate.

As PROBE continues to develop and adapt, the partnership adheres to a set of core principles which maintain its integrity and impact. These include:

1. Strict confidentiality of the results for each individual site, and anonymity in analyses of aggregate data.

Chapter 2 Literature review

2. Balancing progress in defining 'best practice' with consistency, constancy of purpose and a focus on sound business principles rather than jargon and fads.
3. A belief that, while businesses can clearly learn from others who do similar work, the opportunity to benchmark across sector/geographical boundaries is invaluable.
4. A commitment to the integrity of the benchmarking process, achieved through a focus on the skills and experience of facilitators as well as the tools themselves.

The two main variants of the PROBE tool are "Manufacturing PROBE" and "Service PROBE". The manufacturing version is designed around the "world class manufacturing model" (Hanson & Voss, 1995, p. 61), incorporating elements of tqm, concurrent engineering, lean production and logistics. The design of the service version (Voss, Blackmon, Chase, Rose, & Roth, 1997b, p. 20) draws upon the Service Value Chain model (Heskett, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1997; Heskett, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 2003) and the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1988; Barnes, Sheys, & Morris, 2005; Curry, Stark, & Summerhill, 1999; Buttle, 1996). These tools have been deployed widely, and the data they have gathered have been published in many reports and papers (for example Hanson *et al.*, 1994; Hanson & Voss, 1995; CBI, 1997; Yarrow *et al.*, 1999; Prabhu & Robson, 2000; Appleby & Conner, 2001; Appleby & Mitchell, 2002; Kelly, 2004; Robson, Yarrow, & Owen, 2005).

Kennedy and Pilcher (2003) describe the DTI's "Benchmark Index", which was introduced in 1996 to encourage SMEs to get involved in benchmarking:

Benchmarking has historically been the preserve of larger organisations. This invaluable management tool was generally considered too time-consuming and expensive for smaller organisations to undertake. Therefore, in order to bring it within their reach, the Department of Industry (DTI) in the United Kingdom introduced the then UK Benchmarking Index in October 1996... In the relatively short period that has elapsed since its introduction over 8,000 benchmarks have been carried out, making it arguably the biggest service of its kind in the world.

(Kennedy & Pilcher, 2003, p. 2)

Pilcher (1999) describes the role of public authorities in encouraging the use of diagnostic benchmarking:

Benchmarking at the company level is the responsibility of industry itself; however, public authorities can usefully contribute to its promotion to a wider audience, in particular to SMEs which do not have the resources or the necessary experience to do it alone. There is also a perception that it is an expensive and complicated tool to use. (Pilcher, 1999, p. 50)

Keegan (2001), in a doctoral thesis supervised by the National University of Ireland entitled “Improving SME operational performance using world class networks and benchmarking”, reports the use of diagnostic and metric benchmarking, in combination, as a means of monitoring the effectiveness of a network-based approach to facilitating practice and performance improvement in two groups of small-to-medium enterprises in Ireland. The study applied an action research, multiple case study-based methodology, through which twenty SMEs were assisted “to apply WCM [World Class Manufacturing] concepts, from the early stages of their awareness of the concepts through to their implementation efforts.” (p. ii). The study concludes that this use of networks to support SMEs’ learning from each other in their efforts to implement WCM concepts “... can have a significant impact on the operational effectiveness of small and medium sized companies... The research subjects have achieved improvements in operational performance across industrial sectors and irrespective of geographical location.” (pp. ii-iii).

Keegan presents performance data which appears to demonstrate substantial, in some cases dramatic, improvements in the performance of most of the participating SMEs. As part of the research methodology, two “benchmarking approaches” were used as part of Keegan’s approach to monitoring the effectiveness of the network-based improvement initiatives. Fifteen of the SMEs deployed the “MICROSCOPE” diagnostic benchmarking tool (a member of the “PROBE” suite of tools); and ten of these fifteen deployed MICROSCOPE at least twice, in an effort to obtain a “before and after” picture of these SMEs as a measure of the impact of the intervention on their practices and performance. Table 2.7 summarises

the MICROSCOPE scores for these ten SMEs¹⁰, from which it is clear that, with one exception (where a “practice” score didn’t change), all of the practice and performance scores were higher at the time of the second benchmark. Keegan reports on the changes made and their impact in each SME, and for the ten included in Table 2.7 all of the indicators he presents suggest that these companies improved their performance during the project. For example, Keegan reports that Erin Foods achieved savings totaling £1.9 million, increased output by 10% with reduced on-line wastage while reducing staff numbers by 7%.

TABLE 2.7: “Before and after” diagnostic benchmarking scores for ten small-to-medium sized enterprises

SME name	Practice scores	Performance scores
	before / after	before / after
Kental	48 / 64	47 / 60
Ogenek	49 / 52	49 / 55
Dingle Lamps	46 / 51	49 / 68
European Power Chords	47 / 64	46 / 78
Follain	57 / 68	67 / 74
Tanco	22 / 65	22 / 58
Burrnside Engineering	53 / 66	45 / 61
International Meat Ingredients	58 / 58	33 / 53
Erin Foods	42 / 45	40 / 51
Laserform	65 / 75	65 / 67

The “MICROSCOPE” tool deployed by Keegan is one of the variants of “PROBE”, adapted for use by small to medium sized manufacturing businesses. Keegan was a contributor to that development process, and the deployment of Microscope described in

¹⁰ Of the twenty SMEs that were involved at the start of Keegan’s project, 3 dropped out part-way through the process. Of the remaining 17, only 10 benchmarked twice (or more) using the MICROSCOPE tool, thus providing “before and after” data.

his thesis was a part of the trialing phase of that development process. He describes how him and his employer Enterprise Ireland:

...played a significant role in this development [of benchmarking tools for SMEs] as a) a partner in a leading SME benchmarking consortium and b) as leader of the European Benchmarking Consortium in partnership with DG [Directorate General] Enterprise of the [European] Commission... This research study has played a central role in facilitating the acceptance of benchmarking as an appropriate and useful tool for SMEs in Ireland.

(Keegan, 2001, pp. 96-97).

Reflecting on the diagnostic benchmarking results generated during the project, Keegan concludes that (pp. 227-228):

The combination of benchmarking, as a diagnostic, with the world class improvement process, proved very effective. This could be described as one of the first field trials of the newly developing “Applied Benchmarking for Competitiveness” approach. The results of this study clearly show the approach to be effective and well received... Benchmarking proved useful to companies. The formal questioning and discussion required by the benchmarking process, against an international norm of best practice, led company employees and management to come to a deeper understanding of their businesses and the problems and opportunities facing them... Benchmarking outputs provided objective comparison against sectoral and industrial norms, on an international basis and facilitated the prioritization of improvement activities as well as providing a basis for measuring progress and achievement over time.

Keegan’s (2001, p. 109) statement that “The MICROSCOPE approach was tested and used with many of the companies in the study. It proved useful and was well regarded by those companies who used it” appears to be a somewhat “anecdotal” finding, in that no detail is presented of the research participants’ own views of the utility of the MICROSCOPE tool. Keegan does not discuss the issue (or perhaps, in his view, the non-issue) of the accuracy with which the tool is measuring that which it purports to measure. Some details are

presented, however, of apparent links between the benchmarking results of the participating SMEs and the development work undertaken by these companies during the period of study. For example, for a company called “Kental”, which designed and manufactured air handling and conditioning equipment:

The benchmarking results were recorded for Kental towards the start of their.... initiative, as one of the first Irish SMEs to be involved in the benchmarking process. The company was benchmarked again, at the end of the... process. The company rated a practice-performance score of 48v47 at the start of the initiative. This score placed Kental in the Vulnerable category. The company was clearly servicing client needs based on individual effort rather than systemic capability. The second benchmark exercise placed the company at 64v60, in terms of practice and performance. This score positioned the company in the Contender category. At that time, the level of practice was now leading the performance being achieved. Based on an understanding of the company this appears to be a question of timing until the level of performance rose to meet the commensurate level of practice already implemented... The company had moved from the Vulnerable category to the Contender category.

(Keegan, 2001, pp. 290-292).

Keegan presents a fifteen page description (pp. 277-292) of Kental’s involvement in the “World Class” initiative and the changes which were made within the company during and through that involvement. Improvements were made in the factory’s layout and methods of manufacture and product testing. Staff were trained to enhance their manufacturing skills, and a number of “World Class Manufacturing practices” were adopted (such as the use of process flow charts and check sheets, set up time reduction and the introduction of kan ban-based¹¹ methods of stock replenishment). Keegan reports that the company was not inclined to release detailed information about the improved results they achieved by making these changes, but that they indicated that “throughput had effectively doubled without increasing production staff numbers”, and that “...these improvements in productivity were achieved due to improved involvement of staff, the redefinition of the manufacturing process and improved quality.” (p. 289). Kental reported some frustration with their ability to assimilate

¹¹ “Kan ban” is a Japanese term which refers to an approach to material control in a manufacturing setting, based on the principle of “pulling” materials through the system on an as-needed basis, rather than “pushing” materials into the system based on a forecast or planned level of need.

and apply world class practices as quickly as they wanted to, although Keegan expresses the view that they did in fact implement improvements rapidly, and that their frustration “...was more an indication of their enthusiasm than an indicator of poor progress.” (p. 292). Keegan gives no details of the timescales within which this company (or his other case study companies) made the reported changes, but he does tell us that “The [Kental] team were positively disposed to continuing their world class efforts and were keen for the local development agency to facilitate them in this.” (Keegan, 2001, p. 292).

Interestingly, there is no suggestion, in Keegan’s detailed description of events at Kental, that the diagnostic benchmarking process completed at an early stage was instrumental in identifying improvement opportunities and setting an agenda for the subsequent changes. It seems that the Microscope tool was used in this company to measure the impact of their improvement efforts, but it is not clear whether it contributed to shaping those efforts.

Throughout Keegan’s description and analysis of the case studies, diagnostic benchmarking (MICROSCOPE) results are presented as evidence of the “state of play” in the SMEs before and after the WCM process was completed, and therefore of the progress and achievements that apparently arose from that process. Keegan appears to work on the assumption that MICROSCOPE is providing meaningful and reliable measures of the SMEs’ practices and performance, and provides little commentary on the efficacy of the measuring tool itself. There are two exceptions to this – the first is in the case study of Dingle Lamps:

The last benchmark for the business had moved the company to 51v68, where they are now in the inefficient category. Still, performance leads practice. However, there could conceivably be a skewing of the results. MICROSCOPE was developed for manufacturing companies... [Dingle Lamps] made no use of a number of practices considered to be inappropriate for the hand thrown pottery sector. Given the company’s steady rise in performance rating, and taking into consideration the improved practices within the company, their practice level, vis-à-vis the pottery sector, could possibly rate higher. (Keegan, 2001, p. 324).

The second exception is in the case study of Burnside Engineering:

The company had started their WCM activity with a benchmarking exercise. After nine months of activity the company embarked on a review and re-focusing of their activities. The cell leaders and administration management requested that a second benchmarking exercise be carried out, the full team examined their activities to date and developed a further response to address their then current issues. At that time they decided to continue with the three core teams, however, they adjusted the mix of the teams, moving some members from one to another team. They also introduced some new staff members to the process. (p. 448).

No further detail is presented of this benchmarking exercise, but Keegan's reporting of it appears to imply that MICROSCOPE was used within Burnside Engineering not just as a means of setting a baseline and later measuring the impact of improvement initiatives, but also as a means of focusing or re-focusing those initiatives. However, throughout this and his other case studies, Keegan reports only the "headline level" benchmarking results that the companies received as feedback (in the form of an overall score for practice and an overall score for performance), and does not provide any information about the more detailed feedback that MICROSCOPE provided to the companies.

Keegan's analysis, then, provides an in-depth account of the use of diagnostic benchmarking primarily as a measuring tool to monitor the impact of "World Class Manufacturing" concepts on the practices and performance of a number of SMEs. The research provides some fascinating insights onto the efforts to improve that were made by these companies, and into the role of a supportive infrastructure (in the form of networks and externally-provided training and facilitation); and reports some apparently impressive results in terms of the improved performance of most of the SMEs during the timescale of the study. It also provides some insights into the role of diagnostic benchmarking within these SMEs; but in this context it leaves a number of questions unanswered. Keegan identifies a number of areas for possible future research, including:

...the creation of a national consultancy resource focused on the development of SMEs...How can such a resource be constructed?... [and]... Can the approach be transferred

successfully to other jurisdictions, to other countries? [and] Comparisons of Irish and European company metrics and benchmark data could also be studied... [and] The research suggests that a positive synergy could exist between the use of qualitative and quantitative benchmarking. This is an area for possible further research, as most work to date has centred around the use of either qualitative or quantitative approaches. (Keegan, 2001, pp. 225-226).

While acknowledging the potential merits of Keegan's suggestions, I would also highlight several other questions that his research leaves unanswered, including:

- ❑ How effective was the MICROSCOPE tool in this context in terms of the "accuracy" of the measurements it was used to make? Or, more fundamentally, what is it that the tool is actually measuring?; how closely does this correspond to what it is designed to measure?
- ❑ What role, if any, did the diagnostic benchmarking process in this case (or these cases) play as an enabler of organisational improvement?
- ❑ What meanings did the participating staff within the SMEs attach to their experiences of diagnostic benchmarking?

The impact and efficacy of diagnostic benchmarking

Finn and Porter (1994) conducted a postal survey of organisations that were known to be involved in “TQ-based self-assessment”, seeking information about their objectives and experiences. It is not clear from their account how the questionnaire was constructed. Thirty three (47%) of the organisations approached provided a response. The main findings were that:

- ❑ The most common objectives identified by respondents were “continuous improvement” (29 respondents) and “measuring TQ progress” (24)
- ❑ Sixty three per cent of respondents reported using the EFQM Model (with 26% using the Baldrige Framework, and 11% using other models)
- ❑ The most common self-assessment method was “top team discussion”, followed by “employee discussion”; only four of the respondents were using the “written report” approach as their only method of self-assessment, though another 8 were using it as one of their multiple methods.
- ❑ Sixty nine percent of the respondents reported involving fewer than 10% of their organisation’s employees in self-assessment; organisations that had been engaging in self-assessment for a longer time period appeared more likely to be involving a higher proportion of their employees.

Table 2.8 shows the survey’s findings regarding the benefits of self-assessment reported by the respondents. Finn and Porter report that “Twenty-three organisations indicated one or more benefits from self-assessment... The remaining organizations are too early into self-assessment to have recognized benefits as yet.” (p. 59). The authors do not discuss whether this is an assumption or assertion, or whether the other ten organisations themselves responded that “it is too soon to recognize benefits.”

TABLE 2.8: Reported benefits of self-assessment

Benefit	Number of respondents reporting this benefit (n=23)	Percentage (of the 23 respondents who reported any benefits)
are experiencing a focus on continuous improvement	22	96%
are able to measure the progress of the organization	21	91%
have experienced senior management commitment	19	83%
have increased the awareness of the TQ philosophy	17	74%
have focused action planning	16	70%
have improved employee commitment	14	61%
have improved operational performance	12	52%
have improved customer satisfaction	11	48%
have improved financial performance	10	43%
have won an award	5	22%

Source: Finn and Porter (1994, p. 59)

The authors say nothing more about the reported benefits, so it seems safe to assume that they are based on respondents' perceptions. Finn and Porter also report that sixteen out of 29 (55%) who responded said that they were in no doubt that self-assessment was clearly beneficial, with benefits outweighing costs. The authors do not, however, subject this assertion from their respondents to any further scrutiny or challenge.

van der Wiele *et al.* (1995) report a “state of the art study on self-assessment” sponsored by “the European Committee”. Two postal questionnaires were distributed: a more sophisticated version to companies with experience of self-assessment; and a shorter version targeted at “companies which were known to have had some experience of TQM, but whose level of use and application of self-assessment was unknown.” The findings (p. 15) include that the five most important reasons (selected from a list of sixteen) for organisations starting self-assessment are to:

- (1) find opportunities for improvement
- (2) create a focus on a model of tqm based on either the EQA [European Quality Award - now the EFQM Excellence Model] or the MBNQA [Baldrige] criteria
- (3) direct the improvement process
- (4) provide new motivation for the quality improvement process
- (5) manage the business.

On average, respondents rated the success of their first self-assessment as 3.39 on a scale of 1 (not very successful) to 5 (very successful). Subsequent self-assessment activities were rated more highly, and this finding is regarded by the authors as “...an indication of the continuous improvement which is evident in the self-assessment process and the organizational learning involved in discovering how to use the technique.” (p. 16). They report that organisations that have tried self-assessment intend to continue it: “It does not appear to result in management opposition about too much bureaucracy or rivalry, etc.” (p. 16); and sum up that (p. 17):

A major positive result of self-assessment is that managers begin to realize not only what TQM is all about, but also how important it is for the organization. However, to start self-assessment at all levels of the organization, management support is needed. This support needs to come from the top of the organization.

It is not clear whether this last statement is drawn from the findings of the study, or is an assertion on the part of the authors.

There is an interesting footnote to the paper that presents the findings of this survey - a message from the authors to their readership as follows (van der Wiele *et al.*, 1995, p. 17):

The authors quote the 'difficulty of establishing a direct correlation between self-assessment and improved business results'. We can never 'prove' this stuff, just as we can't 'prove' that drinking a bottle of whisky a day is generally bad for you, or staying physically fit and stress free is generally good for you. But we can presumably exercise a modicum of common sense in saying that, if we figure out what are the key success parameters for our business, and we measure, manage, think about and generally try to improve them in an orderly and systematic fashion, that's probably good for us. No, we can't shade out all the variables which actually influence success and failure, but we can take a good guess that it's reasonably good for our corporate health.

Hermel and Ramis-Pujol (2003) highlight the role of "excellence models", as "... a holistic framework of management practices [which] help focus organizations on a variety of assessment and analytical criteria..." They comment that "critiques have been vocal" as soon as some prize-winning organisations have fallen into trouble; but defend the models on the basis that "...a deeper analysis shows that the real causes of most of those failures are most of the time bad management and weak strategies that are, of course, not easily recognized..." The authors identify some limitations of the models:

- ❑ different criteria are given fixed weights that could be considered inflexible and arbitrary;
- ❑ it is not clear that the same framework could be applied to different types of organizations;
- ❑ the models could be taken as a miracle recipe based on the different criteria that have to be followed; and
- ❑ the order and links between different components may bring about limited or biased interpretations.

(Hermal & Ramis-Pujol, 2003, pp. 238-239)

There is a wealth of published testimonial to the beneficial effects of using excellence models for self-assessment and linked activities. Table 2.9 presents some examples.

TABLE 2.9: Quotes from UK Business Excellence Awards brochure (2003)

'The elements of the model have been identified as the key components of business excellence. These have been verified by extensive research and the model has been validated by hundreds of companies throughout Europe.'

Comment from Managing Director of TNT UK Ltd, Award Winner:

'Our involvement with the British Quality Foundation has helped us to double our revenue and profits in the last five years. Self-assessment using the Excellence Model provides a systematic and profitable means of improving performance.'

Comment from Director of Business Excellence BAE Systems, Award Winner:

'The Excellence Model is used throughout our business to assess and direct progress towards our vision of being a role model organisation. The UK Business Excellence Awards process has helped to calibrate our internal self-assessment and has created valuable opportunities to share with, and learn from, other organisations.'

Comment from CEO of Hewlett Packard, Award Winner:

'Entering the UK Business Excellence Award helped us benchmark HP methodology against the Excellence Model, acquire an independent view of our practices, gather additional areas for improvement and motivate our employees.'

Participation in the Benchmark Index benchmarking process is claimed to have delivered impressive benefits:

Small firms who [sic] have taken part in the SBS Benchmarking Scheme have, on average, seen their profits rise by £70,000. The Benchmark Index offers a small business a warts and all picture of a company's strengths and weaknesses. Anyone wishing to find out more...should contact...

(Regional Service for Clustering, 2002).

No analysis is offered as to whether these firms' participation in the benchmarking activity was itself a catalyst or enabler of these increases in profitability.

Mann (1998) asks, “Business Excellence: does self assessment work?”, and provides positive testimony from four food industry companies. He reports that “...100 food companies have had their management systems assessed against the European Business Excellence Model”, responding to the “Food and Drink Industry Benchmarking and Self-Assessment Initiative”, and following a pattern which he describes as typifying UK industry as a whole. Scores in the food industry (out of the maximum possible of 1,000) “vary from 61 to 467... Average (median) value is 223.” Mann reports that, based on their scores, only 23% of food companies “...would be considered as developing along the lines of business excellence”; to be considered in this category, a company would have to score 300 plus. Mann compares the food industry data with data from aerospace, automotive and insurance industries, and concludes that the food industry is the worst performer. However, there is reason for optimism: “It is expected that food industry performance will improve as more companies undertake self-assessments and take actions to address their weaknesses.” Self-assessment, Mann explains, does make sense. He offers no further explanation or analysis of how this expectation can be justified, other than quoting the words of senior managers of three of the food companies as evidence of this (see Table 2.10).

Table 2.10: Food industry senior managers’ comments about self assessment

Seaforth Corn Mills said: ‘It provides a focus on what to improve using objective evidence. It enabled us to use a more structured approach for developing our business plan. In particular, it encouraged us to re-consider how we measured and addressed our customer relationships. If this wasn’t good for the business it would go straight out of the door - it is good for the business.’

Quest International commented, ‘We started looking at the European Business Excellence Model in 1995/6 as we are a European company. We wanted to do something that our European customers would understand and fitted our philosophy.’

‘It provides an independent source of questioning, ensuring we address all areas of the business’, said Dromona Quality Foods.

Source: Mann (1998)

How self-assessment fits with a company's overall corporate approach was explained by Birds Eye Walls. The company said that it had two prime goals, as a whole:

- ❑ For its profitable growth to exceed market growth
- ❑ To be world class in all it did.

Birds Eye Wall's difficulty before self-assessment was in relation to measuring the more subjective corporate goal of being 'world class in all we do'. Now, with self-assessment, it has an objective comparison of its performance against this key corporate goal.

(Mann, 1998, p. 34)

It seems, then, that these four food industry companies have perceived benefits in their adoption of the Excellence Model as an assessment tool. Nevertheless, it is perhaps something of a "leap of faith" to extrapolate from these reported experiences to the expectation that the industry as a whole will improve its performance by following their lead.

Oldfield (2002a) reports that senior executives of three "award winning companies" attribute their organisations' success partly to their adoption of the Excellence Model, but each has its different way of using the Model. TNT Express¹², for example:

...goes to great lengths to put the Excellence Model in its boardroom... everybody is involved in the Model. It takes up all our time because everything we do has to fit into it. It has in fact become part of our thought processes.

(Oldfield, 2002a, p. 15)

¹² Oldfield reports that TNT Express won the UK Business Excellence Award in 1994, and the European Quality Award in 1998; the quotes in her article are from Alan Jones, Group Managing Director.

Bradford and Bingley¹³, on the other hand, has adopted a more evolutionary approach, judging that "... it is not appropriate... to push excellence throughout the organisation at this time." Managing Director Keith Greenhough explains that:

'It is not a bag of pixie dust. It is a management tool that is good in the planning process. It is a rich source of ideas to calibrate and benchmark whether you are operating in an effective way... Some parts of the company should have the Model but in other areas they are not ready for it... it takes a long time to spread such a far reaching tool as the Excellence Model throughout the company.' Keith believes that the best approach is to persuade senior colleagues to take it on board, not to lumber them with a corporate edict.

(Oldfield, 2002a, p. 16)

Yell won the European Quality Award in 1999¹⁴. "That success resulted from a decade of commitment to the principles and practice of total quality", reports Oldfield, explaining that since the late 1980s Yell's senior managers have led the development of a "total quality culture":

In 1993 the senior team decided that the best method to review progress was through an annual business assessment against the Excellence Model... From the outset it adopted the approach of creating and assessing an award-style submission document. Although this is the most challenging of the internal assessment mechanisms, it does yield the greatest benefits - the rigorous assessment leads to greater accuracy, value and credibility in both the assessment and the feedback... The Excellence Model has delivered tangible benefits. Yell has achieved best-in-class productivity levels as well as significantly reduced business error rates. Its employee satisfaction levels are among the best in Europe. (pp. 16-17)

¹³ Mortgage Express won the UK Business Excellence Award in 1996, and was acquired by Bradford and Bingley in 1997; quotes in Oldfield's article are from Keith Greenhough, Managing Director Lendings & Savings Division

¹⁴ Quotes from Yell in Oldfield's article are from John Condron, Chief Executive

Oldfield's assertion that the Model has delivered "tangible benefits" to Yell is not supported here by any further evidence or argument. Similarly, she reports that the other award winners have benefited from their adoption of "the Model", apparently relying on the companies' executives' assertions to authenticate these claims:

TNT has seen successes from using the Model... Alan explains 'The first thing we did was prepare a submission which highlighted where we needed to improve...' The process of entering for the award and carrying out self-assessment has been reflected in the company's improved profits. Alan believes that it has enabled TNT to build on its market leadership of express delivery around the globe. 'We are the only organisation which has won the UK Quality Award and then gone on to win four consecutive European quality prizes culminating in the European Quality Award in 1998.'

...Although the picture is less straightforward at B&B because the Model is not compulsory, Keith believes there have been benefits for the organisation... Mortgage Express began using the Model in 1991. At the time of the takeover there were a lot of changes taking place, which Keith points out is often uncomfortable. With a round of redundancies, it has at times made it difficult to get high scores in the people part of the Model. Still, Keith has persisted: 'With the Model you can keep reinventing yourself.' (Oldfield, 2002a, p. 17)

Matykiewicz (2001) interviewed a number of business advisors, who were considered to be in a position to involve SMEs in benchmarking activity (and in some cases had done so) about their experiences of and attitudes to "benchmarking". She cites a typical response:

'Nobody in the outside world knows about it, I'm having great difficulty getting into companies to interest them in benchmarking. Intellectually they are interested, but commercially they don't see a real advantage to them. The word itself has a lot to do with it.'

(Personal Business Advisor employed by "Business Link", January 2001.

Quoted in Matykiewicz (2001))

Hyland and Beckett (2002) present two case studies of companies (an aerospace component manufacturer wholly based in Australia and a global food packager with multiple plants around the world) that have deployed what they describe as "internal benchmarking."

Their description of this approach - which they dub “learning by auditing” - suggests that it is another name for “diagnostic benchmarking”, albeit that each of the case study companies is deploying a tool that they have developed or adapted “in-house”. The authors draw upon published evidence from external benchmarking programmes (Drew, 1997; Szulanski, 1996) to suggest that such programmes have delivered some benefits but have limitations:

... best practices identified in one organisation were not necessarily easily transferred to another... some aspects of organisational culture and communications were the main inhibitors. What made sense to the people in one organisation was not necessarily understood completely by the people in another one, particularly if the information transmission path was complex.

(Hyland & Beckett, 2002, p. 293)

In an attempt to test the robustness of the PROBE methodologies, a colleague and I (Robson & Yarrow, 2000) subjected data collected through the PILOT and MICROSCOPE variants of PROBE to statistical testing, concluding (p. 17) that the data (and, by implication, the data collection methods) were “reasonably robust.” However this conclusion should be qualified, in that what was demonstrated was a degree of consistency between data gathered through several variants on the theme of the “normal” PROBE methods, rather than any more profound indication of the “accuracy” or “truthfulness” of the data.

Voss, Ahlstrom and Blackmon (1998) investigate how companies deploying diagnostic benchmarking against a model of manufacturing excellence use the information that they gain from the benchmarking process. They differentiate between four types of companies:

- ❑ Can do - companies that scored below average on operational practice and performance, but used the diagnostic benchmarking exercise to take action to improve manufacturing performance
- ❑ Can't do - companies that scored below average on operational practice and performance, but failed to use the diagnostic benchmarking exercise proactively. The lack of action was often due to business pressures

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- ❑ Will do - High-performing companies which used the results from the diagnostic benchmarking exercise to further their manufacturing performance. They are learning companies
- ❑ Won't do - High-performing companies which did not use the results of the diagnostic benchmarking exercise. This was often due to complacency; a view of already knowing what to do and not needing to learn any more.

The different types of companies are differentiated by the amount they have learnt from the diagnostic benchmarking exercise, given their starting point in terms of practice and performance. The 'can do's' and the 'will do's' have learnt much from the exercise, whereas the 'can't do's' and the 'won't do's' have learnt less.

(Voss *et al.*, 1998, pp. 535-536)

Delbridge *et al.* (1995) are critical of the *Made in Britain* study and, implicitly, of the way in which the PROBE tools are facilitated with benchmarking teams; expressing concerns about "the power of independent and objective measurement in 'moving the goalposts'"; they express surprise that, within the "Made in..." studies (and subsequent deployment of the PROBE tools which grew out of those studies):

...key performance measures are largely based on a company's own reported position in relation to its competitors. The experience of [our own] project is that many people have no idea of where they stand against the opposition because they have no means of making sufficiently precise comparisons. In addition, external symbols of the 'model factory' (cleanliness, tidiness, number of employee photos on the wall and so on), which may lead the casual observer to rate a plant highly, did *not* correlate well with actual performance. The message from [our] benchmarking project is that in the same way that a book should not be judged by its cover, so the performance of a factory should not be judged by the colourfulness of its kaizen display

(Delbridge *et al.*, 1995, p. 61)

Rohlfers (2004) expresses some (different) reservations about both PROBE and the Benchmark Index, pointing out that:

...standards can only be drawn from sample firms of these databases. Those firms are not necessarily the best in their class, and do not necessarily match best the benchmarking firm in terms of process analogy. Benchmarks are defined locally rather than through a reflection of international standards as suggested by German actors... (p. 532)

Rohlfers (p. 535) suggests that benchmarking has so far been treated by the business community and most researchers as “an accepted and undisputed concept [which] has escaped a critical reflection about its application and its effects on employment relations inside the business” :

This might be explained by the following reasons. First, the understanding of benchmarking conforms to positivist conventions, and hence gives the appearance of straightforward objectivity. Benchmarking is couched in terms of operationalised variables, testable hypotheses and plausible and generally supportive case studies. The benchmarking toolkits of the DTI and CBI... support the assertion that benchmarking is an objective method of measuring and improving business performance. The power of the benchmarking tool appears to reside in its embodiment of logic, rationality and truth. Critics may point to the shortage of trustworthy survey evidence and... only the successful case studies are published.

Rohlfers (2004, pp. 536-537) suggests that it is highly problematic to consider benchmarking as a purely positive and context-independent managerial tool; and questions whether employees would necessarily identify unreservedly with benchmarking's aims, and whether it would necessarily be in their interests to do so.

Organisational learning and its links to benchmarking

In his in-depth exploration of “How American business learned to play the quality game”, Cole (1999) places emphasis on the importance of “organisational learning” in the successful adoption and development of “quality” practices. He also describes the role of a diagnostic approach in Hewlett Packard’s development of tqc and tqm and, without making the connection very explicit, seems to indicate that the diagnostic approach was linked to organisational learning and the management of change.

Others have also identified these links. Zairi (1998, p. 2) regards the encouragement of continuous learning as the “essence” of benchmarking’s role; Codling (1998, p. 51) emphasises the increased opportunities for learning which arise from (process) benchmarking; Voss *et al.* (1996; 1998) highlight “external and internal learning” (1996, p. 22) and diffusion of quality and other practices (1998, p. 23) in their reports of the “Made in Europe” studies; Hyland and Beckett (2002) link learning and “internal benchmarking”; and in my own work with colleagues (Pemberton, Stonehouse, & Yarrow, 2001) we have begun to further explore the link between benchmarking and organisational learning, concluding that:

The challenge for businesses embracing benchmarking revolves around their ability to develop a learning culture that goes beyond the imitation of existing best practice by developing new ideas and processes to improve efficiency and enhance quality, as well as striving to improve upon the practices of competitors. In effect, organizational learning would appear to be an essential ingredient if companies are to optimize the outputs of the benchmarking process in pursuit of superior performance.

(Pemberton *et al.*, 2001, pp. 133-134)

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to conduct a comprehensive review of the literature in the field of organisational learning, but this section will briefly review some of the key concepts and their potential links to the role of diagnostic benchmarking as an enabler of organisational improvement.

Hyland and Beckett (2002) point out that external benchmarking programmes have sometimes found that, particularly in large organisations, “best practice” was to be found elsewhere within the organisation that was doing the benchmarking: “...researchers from the American Productivity and Quality organisation, O’Dell and Grayson (1998), observed a richness of untapped internal knowledge that lead to the comment frequently echoed by others ‘If only we knew what we know.’” Hyland and Beckett (p. 294) describe an emerging debate:

...concerning what organisations should learn and how effective learning takes place and is translated into action (Dunphy, Turner, & Crawford, 1996)... there is general consensus that organisations need to find better and smarter ways to learn... (Argyris, 1994; Senge, 1990a). Dunphy *et al.* (1996: p. 7) have defined ‘a learning organisation as one which develops and maintains competencies both to perform, and to change the organisation to maintain or improve performance’. More generally, organisational learning is concerned with improving the behaviour and capability of individuals so that the organisation can more effectively respond to its environment.

Argyris (1999) suggests that there are two quite distinct branches of the literature on organisational learning - the branch which is the domain mostly inhabited by consultants and practitioners, which focuses on what Argyris calls “the learning organization” - a practice-oriented and prescriptive body of literature; and the branch which focuses on “organizational learning” - a “predominantly skeptical” body of scholarly work produced by academics. He characterises the practitioner-oriented literature in terms of its central ideal, which:

...includes notions of organizational adaptability, flexibility, avoidance of stability traps, propensity to experiment. Readiness to rethink means and ends, inquiry orientation, realization of human potential for learning in the service of organizational purposes, and creation of organizational settings as contexts for human development.

(Argyris, 1999, p. 1).

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The scholarly literature, on the other hand, according to Argyris (1999, p. 7), is intentionally distant from practice, and is non-prescriptive and value neutral. It focuses on the questions that the practitioner-focused literature tends to ignore:

What does 'organizational learning' mean? How is organizational learning at all feasible? What kinds of organizational learning are desirable, and for whom and with what chance of actual occurrence? The scholars... generally adopt a skeptical stance towards these questions. Their skepticism tends to revolve around three main challenges:

1. There are those who argue that the very idea of organizational learning is contradictory, paradoxical, or quite simply devoid of meaning.
2. A second challenge to the idea of organizational learning accepts it as a meaningful notion. What it denies is that organizational learning is always or ever beneficial.
3. A third kind of skepticism... questions whether real-world organizations do learn productively, and whether, in principle and in actuality, they are capable of coming to do so.

Argyris explores concepts of "productive organizational learning" (Argyris, 1999, pp. 48-52) and "double loop learning" (Argyris, 1999, pp. 67-69; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p. 44), and highlights the importance of tacit knowledge as "the primary basis for effective management and the basis of its deterioration" (p. 54), suggesting that:

The primary basis for effective management is to define and transform, as much as possible, the behavior required to achieve the organization's objectives into routines that work... Routines are implemented through skillful actions. Actions that are skillful are based largely on tacit knowledge. Such actions become reinforcing of the status quo. The self-reinforcing features tend to reduce inquiry into gaps and inconsistencies in the tacit knowledge. When these surface, they are often embarrassing or threatening. Individuals deal with embarrassment or threat with another set of skillful - hence tacit - actions. These actions are counter-productive to effective action.

Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) propose that skills and expertise at “organizational knowledge creation” are crucial to the success of organisations:

By organizational knowledge creation we mean the capability of a company as a whole to create new knowledge, disseminate it throughout the organization, and embody it in products, services and systems. Organizational knowledge creation is the key to the distinctive ways that Japanese companies innovate. They are especially good at bringing about innovation continuously, incrementally and spirally. (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995, p. 3)

These authors suggest that the need for organisations to change continuously is the central concern of organisational learning theorists; and that, like individuals, organisations must constantly confront novel aspects of their circumstances:

It is widely agreed that learning consists of two kinds of activity. The first kind... is obtaining know-how in order to solve specific problems based upon existing premises. The second... is establishing new premises (i.e. paradigms, schemata, mental models, or perspectives) to override the existing ones. These two kinds of learning have been referred to as ‘Learning I’ and ‘Learning II’... or ‘single-loop learning’ and ‘double-loop learning’... From our point of view, the creation of knowledge certainly involves interaction between these two kinds of learning, which forms a kind of dynamic spiral.

(Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995, p. 44)

Senge (1990b, pp. 5-11) describes “five new component technologies [which] are gradually converging to innovate learning organisations”. The technologies, or “disciplines”, are:

- ❑ Systems thinking
- ❑ Personal mastery
- ❑ Mental models
- ❑ Building shared vision
- ❑ Facilitate team learning.

He describes systems thinking as “the fifth discipline”...that integrates the disciplines, fusing them into a coherent body of theory and practice... [and] keeps them from being

separate gimmicks or the latest organization change fads.” (p. 12). Some have labeled systems thinking as the “new dismal science”, because it teaches that a lot of obvious solutions won’t actually work in the long run, and may make things worse, even if they improve matters in the short run; but Senge suggests (pp. 63-64) that “systems thinking also shows that small, well-focused actions can sometimes produce significant, enduring improvements, if they’re in the right place. Systems thinkers refer to this principle as ‘leverage.’”

Senge describes the five disciplines as bodies of theory and technique that have to be studied and mastered to be put into practice; and as developmental paths for acquiring skills and competencies:

To practice a discipline is to be a lifelong learner. You ‘never arrive’; you spend your life mastering disciplines. You can never say ‘We are a learning organization’, any more than you can say ‘I am an enlightened person.’ The more you learn, the more acutely aware you become of your ignorance. Thus, a corporation cannot be ‘excellent’ in the sense of having arrived at a permanent excellence; it is always in the state of practicing the disciplines of learning, of becoming better or worse.

(Senge, 1990, p. 11)

He suggests (p. 202) that learning eventually results in changes in action, as opposed to just taking in new information and form new ideas; and that this highlights the importance of recognising the gap between our “espoused theories” (what we say) and our “theories-in-use” (the theories that lie behind our actions). Failure to recognise this gap can lead us to “...believe that we’ve ‘learned’ something just because we’ve got the new language or concepts to use, even though our behavior is completely unchanged.”

Chapter summary: the body of knowledge: strengths, weaknesses and identified gaps

The chapter has reviewed the substantial literature relating to the domain of knowledge in which diagnostic benchmarking is rooted, “quality improvement” and “business excellence”. It has highlighted the growing body of work which scrutinises “quality” from a more critical perspective, and a number of contemporary controversies and unanswered questions. The evidence in favour of business excellence and its positive impact on organisational performance is growing in quantity and rigour, but the issue remains contested and there are suggestions that organisations might benefit from applying elements of the philosophy and principles without adopting the whole “package” and without attaching the “quality” label to their efforts. There are enduring accusations of “faddism”, and challenges to the apparently widespread belief that “quality” is unequivocally good, and that its implementation is necessarily to the benefit of all stakeholders.

This chapter has also presented an in-depth review of the body of knowledge relating to diagnostic benchmarking itself, and of benchmarking’s links to organisational learning, which have been identified by a number of authors in the field but have yet to be explored in depth. It has demonstrated that there is a wealth of publications on the subject of benchmarking in general and, albeit to a lesser extent, of diagnostic benchmarking in particular; but that the focus of much of this literature is on either “how to do it users’ guides” or on the presentation and analysis of aggregate outputs from the benchmarking of many organisations in a particular category, or case studies of improvement efforts within which diagnostic benchmarking apparently plays a peripheral role; and relatively little focus on the public sector, or on issues such as evaluation, costs and timescales of benchmarking activities. The literature contains little in the way of in-depth insight into the role of diagnostic benchmarking, and the drivers of its efficacy in playing its role. Hence, a significant gap in the knowledge base has been identified, which this research study aims to address, thus making a valuable contribution to knowledge.

Chapter 3 The changing face of public services in the UK

Given that the case study organisation at the heart of this study's primary research is a local authority, it will be helpful to explore what the literature has to say about the role of diagnostic benchmarking, self-assessment and organisational excellence in the context of the public services. This chapter explores these issues, considering whether there are fundamental and important differences between the ways that organisations are managed and measured across the public-private divide, briefly reviewing the contemporary "quality" and "performance" context for local authorities, and establishing the nature of deployment of benchmarking and of business (or "organisational") excellence in the UK public services.

The chapter is structured in the following sections:

- ❑ Public and private: different but the same? The New Public Management
- ❑ tqm and organisational excellence - not (just) private property
- ❑ Best Value and Comprehensive Performance Assessment
- ❑ Benchmarking in local authorities and the UK public services
- ❑ Chapter summary

Public and private: different but the same? The New Public Management

Dewhurst, Lorente and Dale (1999) categorise “public organisations”, beginning with the assumption that any organisation that does not have increased profit as its objective is “public”, and dividing these into non-governmental and governmental categories. Some governmental organisations are the only providers of their products, others have “competitors”, and they are further divided according to the existence or otherwise of internal competition “[for example] when the... organisation offers its product or service through different suborganisations, as is the case with public educational services and with security services” (p. 267). For the purposes of their analysis, these researchers assume that public organisations pursue a social benefit within a limited budget: “Non-monopolistic governmental organisations will have little concern about competitive issues, since their aim is to satisfy social needs rather than increase the number of customers” (p. 267).

Pollitt (2003) reminds us of the importance of the public services:

Good public management is an essential part of any civilized modern society. Attempts... by various politicians (UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and US President Ronald Reagan among them) to ‘roll back the state’ did not, in fact, transform the ‘big picture’ that much. Public spending remains a substantial percentage of the gross national product in every Western European and North American country (indeed, after 20 years of cuts and ‘wars on waste’ in a number of states this fraction is *higher* than it was at the beginning)... In most European states the public sector still accounts for a considerable percentage of the total workforce, and a large percentage of the job destinations of the most highly educated... Nevertheless, much *has* changed. In many countries there have been intensive and unrelenting efforts to manage public organizations and public programmes in new ways. Privatization, contracting-out, public-private partnerships, decentralization, internal markets, re-engineering, citizens’ charters, citizens’ panels, citizens’ juries, codes of public service ethics, one-stop shops, performance audit, evaluation – the list of new initiatives is endless. The boundaries between the public sector, the voluntary sector and the commercial sector seem to have become considerably more complex and ambiguous. The literature on these changes is enormous, the rhetoric – from politicians, public managers and academics – incessant.

(Pollitt, 2003, pp. xiii-ix).

A key question is whether the job of leading and managing organisations is the same in all sectors. Pollitt explores a range of views on the matter. For example, he suggests that one of the pioneers of management theory, Frederick Taylor (Taylor, 1913), believed that “management is management is management”; but that Herbert Simon differs:

While the similarities between governmental and non-governmental organisations are greater than is generally supposed, some differences nevertheless exist. Most often these are differences in degree rather than kind. (Simon, Smithburg, & Thompson, 1950, p. 10)

Prime Minister Tony Blair has made public his views on the peculiarities of the sector:

People in the public sector are more rooted in the concept that if it's always been done in this way it must always be done in this way than any other group of people... It's not that there aren't wonderful people now with a tremendous commitment to public service, but you try getting change in the public sector and public services – I bear the scars on my back after two years of government.

(Blair speaking to a group of “venture capitalists” on 7 July 1999. Cited in Pollitt, 2003, p. 4)

Pollitt (2003, p. 24) sums up the argument thus:

The public sector context is - often, though not always - different... if it is to retain legitimacy in the eyes of citizens, [it] has both to practice and visibly to display values of equity, impartiality and a certain moral enlightenment which are not *central* to the commercial marketplace, even if they are found there.

Public sector managers, Pollitt suggests, face a more complex task, striving (like their private sector counterparts) for improvements in efficiency, effectiveness, reliability and quality; but doing so in a different context, in which “...the exercise of democratic and communal values takes a much more salient place.” Pollitt (pp. 26-28) reports that “Over the past ten years or so there has been a huge fuss over the ‘New Public Management (NPM)’”, and summarises its key elements, as shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Key elements of the New Public Management (NPM)

1	A shift in the focus of management systems and efforts from inputs and processes towards outputs and outcomes
2	A shift towards more measurement and quantification, especially in the form of systems of 'performance indicators' and/or explicit 'standards'.
3	A preference for more specialized, 'lean', 'flat' and autonomous organizational forms rather than large, multi-purpose, hierarchical ministries or departments.
4	A widespread substitution of contracts (or contract-like relationships) for what were previously formal, hierarchical relationships.
5	A much wider-than-hitherto deployment of markets (or market-type mechanisms (MTMs)) for the delivery of public services
6	Alongside the favouring of MTMs, an emphasis on service quality and a consumer orientation (thus extending the market analogy by redefining citizen-users of public services as 'consumers')
7	A broadening and blurring of the frontiers between the public sector, the market sector and the voluntary sector (for example through the use of public-private partnerships and/or contracting out)
8	A shift in value priorities away from universalism, equity, security and resilience, and towards efficiency and individualism.

Adapted from Pollitt, 2003, pp. 27-28

TQM and organisational excellence - not (just) private property

In the context of “New Public Management”, and particularly its emphasis on service quality and consumer orientation, Pollitt (2003, p. 28) reports that “Across Western Europe and North America literally thousands of service quality improvement projects were launched, frequently using private sector-derived techniques such as Total Quality Management...” Ten years previously, Bendell, Boulter and Kelly (1993, pp. 123-135) suggested that total quality management and benchmarking are as applicable to public administration as to private sector manufacturing and service industry, but that their application in the public services is more problematic:

There are many reasons for this, including:

- ❑ Staff culture and the lack of individual ownership, responsibility, client-care and staff empowerment
- ❑ Bureaucratic and non-responsive systems
- ❑ Lack of clarity about the multiple customers and stakeholders involved in even single transactions
- ❑ Political, as opposed to market-determined, levels and extent of service, especially for subsidized and zero-priced services
- ❑ Problems of scale and complexity associated with the large, centralized organisations, sometimes with a large-scale technological basis.

(Bendell *et al.*, 1993, p. 123)

The authors noted, however, that there had been widespread attempts to apply tqm principles in Public Administration, including attempts to overcome what they saw as the mismatch between tqm models’ “single-customer focus” and the reality for public service organisations that transactions involve multiple customers and stakeholders: “For example, when a police officer arrests a potential criminal, is the officer’s customer the criminal, the victim, witnesses, the courts, the Home Office or the community?” They suggested that the introduction of “the stakeholder concept” had been an attempt to address this mismatch.

Bendell *et al.* proceeded to describe widespread growth of tqm in the American and UK public sectors, attributing the spread of tqm in the American public services partly to the work of the Federal Quality Institute “...established in 1988 [as] part of the Executive Office of the President...” to act as “...a primary source of leadership, information and consultancy service on quality management in the Federal Government.” They also described examples of quality improvement and benchmarking activities among UK Government departments and agencies, including the use of the Charter Standard and the Charter Mark scheme, and the European Quality Award framework, as standards against which these organisations have benchmarked their own performance.

Morgan and Murgatroyd (1994, pp. 42-61) suggested that “The application of TQM in the public sector is really just beginning”; and explored the many objections and issues that were being raised against the widespread implementation of tqm in that sector:

TQM had in fact official policy standing in the early 1990s within the British National Health Service... In health, education and government contexts generally in Europe and North America, TQM was being advocated almost as something self-evidentially workable and suitable to the public sector because of its proven success in certain industries... there were on the ground a range of a priori based objections to TQM, which we ourselves heard widely expressed, and which were not being addressed. (Morgan & Murgatroyd, 1994, pp. 42-43)

Morgan and Murgatroyd (p. 43) listed five main types of objection that were being raised:

- ❑ The nature of TQM itself inhibits its application to the public sector
- ❑ The nature of the public sector itself is inimical to the reception of TQM applications
- ❑ The work cultures of the professional groups which characterise the public sector are inimical to TQM
- ❑ In the public sector the customer is a more problematic concept
- ❑ Public sector provisions are much more complicated than manufacturing.

The authors explored these objections in detail, concluding that, across the manufacturing, commercial services and public sectors “...there is in common the all transcending focus of serving the customer and no contrasts are suggested... in terms of the validity of key TQM concepts, beliefs and processes.” (Morgan and Murgatroyd, 1994, p. 57). They were unequivocal that:

TQM needs to be seen as a framework which can span all organizational settings, both commercial and public... We see the reality of the fit of TQM to the public sector as one where within the range of its concepts, beliefs and practices, TQM has a core philosophy, some core concepts and generic tools which can be applied to significant advantage within all public sector provisions.

(Morgan and Murgatroyd, 1994, pp. 58-59)

Many authors have commented on the subject of tqm (in its many manifestations, including “excellence”), in the context of the Public Services. Writing in 1999, for example, Dewhurst and colleagues examined the issues associated with the application of “Total Quality Management” in public organisations (Dewhurst *et al.*, 1999). They explored the potential and actual benefits and challenges for such organisations of implementing tqm, bearing in mind the ways in which they differ from private sector businesses.

TQM implies an increase in quality with a decrease in costs, and its impact on organisational profitability is clear. The cost of losing clients as a consequence of non-conforming quality is just one of the factors in the cost equation. However, this and other types of lost opportunity costs... do not exist to the same degree for public sector organisations. The internal rules under which public organisations work are different to those operating under competition, so, it is likely that the results of TQM intervention may also be different. These factors make for interesting analysis in examining the implications of the application of TQM in public organisations.

(Dewhurst, Lorente & Dale, 1999, p. 266).

Chapter 3 The changing face of public services in the UK

The UK's Cabinet Office has consistently promoted the merits of applying quality management principles to the public services, as illustrated by the following press release from February 2000:

Local authorities working to raise their performance were given a boost today in the form of a new practical guide. The *Guide to Quality Schemes and Best Value* gives tips on how schemes such as the Charter Mark and Investors in People can be used to support the achievement of Best Value. It is published jointly by the Cabinet Office, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Improvement and Development Agency... Speaking at a Best Value Conference in Ipswich, Cabinet Office Minister John McCartney told local authority delegates:

‘While quality schemes such as the Charter Mark, the EFQM Excellence Model, Investors in People and ISO9000 cannot of themselves deliver Best Value, they can be a big help. The Excellence Model, which identifies strengths and areas for improvement, fits well with the review requirements of Best Value... Successful examples of the use of quality schemes can be found throughout local government. The best public sector organisations innovate and improve. But all of us must strive to do things better, and spreading best practice, including the use of quality schemes, is one way of achieving the continuous improvement we seek.’

(Cabinet Office, 2000)

Some authors, however, express reservations about the “fit” of quality-related approaches in a public sector setting. Lozeau, Langley and Denis (2002), for example, suggest that:

Public sector organisations are under pressure to adopt private sector tools to sustain legitimacy despite uncertainty about the compatibility of the techniques with this context. We explore the consequences of misfit [and] suggest that when the compatibility gap is large, there is a greater likelihood that formularized techniques will be captured by and integrated into existing organizational dynamics (corruption of the technique) than that the technique will change these dynamics in a way consistent with its objectives (transformation of the organization). (p. 537).

Best Value and Comprehensive Performance Assessment

The concepts of “Best Value” and “Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA)” are of direct relevance to issues of performance, improvement and benchmarking in local authorities. This section sets out explanations of these concepts, and presents a brief review of evidence relating to their impact.

A local authority website (North Eastern Education and Library Board, 2006) provides a clear explanation of “Best Value”:

A fundamental and continuous requirement of the review process is to challenge us and justify why our services exist in the way they do. Best Value is all about innovation and not accepting what we have always done as being the only and necessarily right way. Best Value Reviews require authorities to apply the 4 Cs to each of their functions.

The 4 Cs require authorities to:

- ❑ **challenge** why and how a service is being provided. Best Value will require local authorities to ask themselves fundamental questions about the underlying objectives and priorities of their work;
- ❑ invite **comparison** with others’ performance (including organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors) across a range of relevant indicators;
- ❑ **consult** with local taxpayers, service users and the wider business community about their views and priorities in the setting of new performance targets; and
- ❑ embrace fair **competition** as a means of securing efficient and effective services.

Weaver and Parker (2002) comment that:

Introduced in 2000, best value is a government regime aimed at improving the quality of local government services. It was introduced by the Labour government as a replacement for the competitive compulsory tendering (CCT) regime, which was widely resented by local government. It is administered by the Audit Commission which carries out regular best value inspections on council services, from waste disposal to corporate strategy. A separate housing inspectorate within the commission deals with council’s housing services.

Ball, Bowerman and Hawksworth (2000, p. 24) describe Best Value as the new mantra for local government, “set to be the prevailing notion of effectiveness.” They suggest that the notion is ill-defined, quoting a senior local authority officer who commented in a research interview that “I have an idea of what *I* think it is... The CCT [Compulsory Competitive Tendering] rules were clear, even though they could be bent. Best value isn’t like that.”

Local authorities’ performance is assessed via a set of “Best Value Performance Indicators” (BVPIs), which are made available for public scrutiny through the website of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, where they are described as:

... measures of performance set by the departments in central government. They are called... BVPIs, as they have only been set since the duty of best value on local authorities came into effect under the Local Government Act 1999. Prior to best value, the Audit Commission set similar measures of performance... [They] exist because of the duty of best value, which requires local authorities (and other best value authorities) to seek to achieve continuous improvement by having regard to the efficiency, effectiveness and economy of their service delivery. To see if local authorities are achieving best value central government departments set measures of performance against key service delivery areas...

There are currently 97 BVPI’s (excluding Fire), which cover many, but not all aspects of services provided by local councils:

- Corporate Health – 16
- Education – 18
- Social Services – 14
- Housing – 9
- Housing Benefit and Council Tax – 6
- Waste – 8
- Transport – 9
- Planning – 5
- Environmental Health and Trading Standards – 1
- Culture Services / Libraries and Museums – 4
- Community Safety – 7
- Community Legal Service – 1

(Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2006)

In its publication “Evaluation of the long-term impact of the Best Value regime: Baseline report” (Martin *et al.*, 2003) (an evaluation commissioned by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister), Cardiff University’s Centre for Local & Regional Government Research comments that:

There was clear evidence that in its first year the Best Value regime had a number of important ‘process outcomes’. Key findings from the survey and case studies were that:

- ❑ Many officers and elected members believed that their authorities already possessed some of the internal characteristics that the Best Value regime is intended to encourage. The case study interviews, conducted after the survey, though not providing systematic evidence, suggest that Best Value is encouraging the types of process outcomes anticipated; and
- ❑ Whilst Best Value is a drive for change it is imposing substantial additional burdens and costs on authorities, notably through the new inspection requirements.

(Martin *et al.*, 2003, p. vii)

The trade union UNISON expresses some reservations to its members in a briefing paper entitled “Best Value: what it means for UNISON members” (UNISON, 2002):

Best Value is a major government policy which it claims will improve the quality of council services. An objective we all support in principle. However UNISON has serious concerns. Under Best Value the service you work in will be reviewed, possibly reorganized and could be transferred to the private or voluntary sectors. The government has laid down national criteria for each council to measure up to. Your job security, continuity of employment and conditions of service could all be threatened. Not to mention services. UNISON is fighting to protect members’ conditions and jobs and really improve services. You need to be involved.

CPA is described as follows by the Improvement and Development Agency (I&DeA)¹⁵:

Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) was introduced by a Government white paper in December 2001. Inspections began in 2002, carried out by the Audit Commission, as a means of bringing together the wider audit and inspection framework for local government to produce an overall assessment of council performance and continuous improvement.

The CPA measures the performance of all best value authorities, which includes all single tier, district and county councils, and assesses their capacity to deliver both functions and services to their local communities. This is in line with the best value authorities' statutory requirement to demonstrate continuous improvement with regard to economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

The CPA examines performance from various perspectives giving a complete picture of progress and arrives at a judgment on the authority's capacity to improve. This determines whether a council's performance is 'excellent', 'good', 'fair', 'weak' or 'poor' for the government league tables. (I&DeA, 2005)

In December 2005, the Audit Commission published a review of experiences to date with Comprehensive Performance Assessment in single tier and county councils, reporting that:

Since its introduction in 2002, council services have improved significantly, and CPA is acknowledged to be one of the catalysts for this. CPA has also been a lever for reducing inspection and regulation in better performing councils and focusing support for others. CPA 2005 brings together information from other inspectorates and auditors to form an overall view of the performance of councils. (Audit Commission, 2005a, p. 3)

A similar review of experiences of CPA in district councils (Audit Commission, 2005b) identifies eight “improvement breakthroughs” that district councils are recommended “...to focus on to overcome the challenges they face in securing improvement.” (p. 2) The recommended actions are summarised in Table 3.2.

TABLE 3.2: Eight “improvement breakthroughs” for district councils

Stages of improvement	Key improvement breakthroughs
Moving on from Poor and Weak Councils need to concentrate on arresting decline and securing the foundations to build from – leadership, positive relationships, financial, performance and people management, community engagement and making the most of partnership opportunities.	1 Lead and manage effectively 2 Pull together 3 Make time to listen and learn
Moving on from Fair Councils need to resolve any leadership and relationship issues including tackling any remaining complacency and insularity, clarifying medium- and long-term direction, priorities and targets, strengthening systems and making partnerships more productive.	4 Look outwards 5 Take a long-term view 6 Embed performance management and other systems
Moving on from Good Councils need to make sure that direction and priorities are crystal clear, ensure all communities are engaged, embed systems and satisfy themselves that partnerships are giving the full benefit.	7 Stick with change and improvement
For Excellent councils Councils are performing strongly in most areas but can still do more work on embedding their performance management, making clear the long-term vision and what are not priorities, refining and bolstering scrutiny and risk management and building learning into the way things are done.	8 Prepare for the future and reach for new heights

Source: (Audit Commission, 2005b)

¹⁵ The Improvement and Development Agency (I&DeA) is a Government agency which, according to its website (I&DeA, 2006) , “...works in partnership with all councils, to enhance the performance of the best, accelerate the speed of improvement of the rest, and develop the sector as a whole.”

The Improvement and Development Agency (I&DeA, 2003) has published findings of its investigation into “CPA and employee attitudes: the impact of motivation on organisational success”; concluding:

... that staff in the most successful councils share a common set of characteristics. They have a say in management decisions, use their initiative and creativity, and contribute to planning their own work. They are kept well informed of organisational developments and change, and are enthusiastic advocates of their authority.

(I&DeA, 2003, p. 1)

I&DeA reports that its research has demonstrated conclusively that there is a relationship between CPA score and how employees feel about their organisation and the way it is managed. “On most factors, employees working for Excellent and Good authorities are more positive than employees in other authorities, with employees in Poor authorities not surprisingly, less positive overall.” (p. 4):

What is clear, is that there is more than a ‘feelgood’ factor among high performers at work here. Whilst we would expect to see notable differences in the responses of employees working in Excellent, Good, Fair, Weak and Poor authorities on measures such as advocacy and commitment to the organisation, on many factors there is little or no difference at all.

There is no real difference between Excellent and Poor authorities in terms of the following:

- ❑ Employees’ ability to do interesting work and feeling that they have accomplished something worthwhile;
- ❑ having access to the right training;
- ❑ an acceptable work load;
- ❑ (un)satisfactory basic pay;
- ❑ effective, open and approachable line managers; and
- ❑ job security.

I&DeA report (p. 4) that a number of other factors do seem to "...set excellent and good authorities apart from their fair, weak and poor counterparts":

At the most fundamental level it appears that the most successful authorities are those that value and recognise their employees by allowing them greater input into the decision making processes of the authority, and perhaps, as a consequence, providing more room for individual creativity to flourish. Communications are also key, with Excellent authorities much better at keeping their employees informed than others.

On all of these factors, there are major differences. Employees working for Excellent authorities are much more likely to say they:

- ☐ are satisfied with their ability to have an input into work planning; and
- ☐ have opportunities to show their initiative. Does this indicate a more hierarchical culture in Poor authorities, leaving less room for individual creativity to flourish?
- ☐ rate their line managers more positively on their willingness to listen to employees' ideas. Three in five employees in Excellent authorities agree that this always applies compared to just over two in five in Poor authorities.
- ☐ have a say in management decisions and believe that there is enough opportunity for employees to let the authority know how they feel about things that affect them and their work
- ☐ feel that their authority keeps them well informed. We know from our experience of researching not only employees, but also residents and service users that the more informed people feel, the more positively they are disposed to the organisation in question. Employees, as here, tend to be more positive about their organisation and more satisfied with their current job than their colleagues who feel less informed.
- ☐ believe that the reasons for change within their organisation are well communicated, and that change is well managed.

The research suggests that the above factors are key issues for managers who want to improve performance. This is not only pertinent in the context of raising their organisation's CPA status, but also and perhaps more importantly, because staff working for Excellent authorities are two and a half times more likely to 'strongly agree' that they would speak highly of their organisation to others than those working for Poor authorities.

Benchmarking in local authorities and the UK public services

In reviewing the benchmarking literature (1986 to 2000), Yasin (2002) notes the preponderance of “practitioner-type” publications and pinpoints that very little published work focuses on benchmarking in the public sector. Bendell, Boulter and Goodstadt (1998, p. 13) support this view, noting the lack of attention that public sector benchmarking has received in the literature. This does not mean, however, that there is no relevant published work. Bowerman, Francis, Ball and Fry (2002), for example, describe “The evolution of benchmarking in UK local authorities”, concluding that benchmarking is developing quite separately and differently in the public sector compared to developments in the private sector, with significant features being encouragement and, sometimes, compulsion to benchmark emanating from central government. They identify (p. 446) “...tensions between the openness required by public accountability and the ‘no-blame’ culture associated with continuous improvement”, suggesting that benchmarking activities in local authorities can be categorised as:

- ❑ Compulsory
- ❑ Voluntary; and
- ❑ Defensive

Defensive benchmarking is that benchmarking activity which is undertaken to protect the organisation from potential criticism, typically in advance of compulsory benchmarking (perhaps in order to attain a higher position in a league table), or to prepare for an external review. Bowerman *et al.* (p. 434) suggest that public sector organisations will sometimes benchmark with the aim of being, and being seen to be, “good enough”, rather than necessarily focusing on being “the best”.

Kouzman, Loffler, Klages and Korac-Kakabadse (1999) suggest that, to make an impact in the public sector, benchmarking must overcome a number of challenges, in the shape of “Technical problems, scepticism about usefulness,... and resistance in accepting organizational change as a necessary consequence of benchmarking exercises” (p. 121), but suggest that “...there are some encouraging examples of benchmarking within the public

sector.” They highlight (p. 130) “quality awards” as one type of involvement, suggesting that they have an important function in raising awareness of quality in the sector, but questioning whether awards deliver much overall benefit:

...quality awards do not automatically have a motivational function for the ‘winning’ organizations. For organizations that do not achieve an award, such competitions can be highly dysfunctional. Quality awards tend to be self-selecting in that organizations that do not even dare to participate... are ignored. Does the award program have indirect motivational effects by giving such organizations an example? It becomes clear that the capability of such organizations to become ‘learning organizations’... is the precondition for benchmarking. Quality awards do not reach, and can have no impact on, those organizations which lack elements of a learning culture. Pessimistically, this means that quality awards are more likely to be a means of making relatively ‘good’ organizations ‘better’ and that they cannot ‘mobilize’ the mass of public organizations and agencies.

(Kouzman *et al.*, 1999, p. 130)

Kouzman *et al.* do not discuss the role of the models at the heart of quality awards schemes, or other diagnostic benchmarking tools, outside the context of awards schemes. However Keady (2002, p. 26) reports that at least one in four local authorities use the EFQM Excellence Model “to some extent”, and attributes their increasing interest in the Model to “the advent of best value [when] significant numbers began to see the potential that the framework offered to improve organisational management and development.” Keady’s survey of local authorities, undertaken for the I&DeA¹⁶, found that local authorities’ main reasons for using the Model were to:

- ❑ systematically drive continuous improvement (83%)
- ❑ systematically identify improvement opportunities (68%)
- ❑ improve performance management (63%)
- ❑ deliver best value (59%)

¹⁶ the I&DeA is the UK Government-backed “Improvement and Development Agency”

Keady (2002, p. 27) reports that eighty three per cent of survey respondents "...felt that their use of the Model had led to improvements in those parts of the organisation using it"; and that most reported that the greatest impact had been on people results, strategy and planning, and key performance results.

Ball *et al.* (2000) examine, through four case studies, experiences of benchmarking in local government, concluding that benchmarking has been transferred and enthusiastically adopted in local authorities, and adapted to the needs and circumstances of the sector:

The development of benchmarking... has been against a backdrop of fiscal or other legislative controls emanating from central government. Under budgetary pressures, local authorities have given in to the use of cost-based benchmarks to find 'slack'. An investment of effort in 'benchmarking' may thus yield a quick pay-back, but this particular manifestation represents little development of benchmarking practice beyond mere performance measurement as encapsulated in the 'intuitive estimates' approach... Under best value, however, benchmarking is apparently singled out as a highly advantageous management tool by central government for improving services; such a view is simplistic as it ignores the entanglement of benchmarking in the wider policy process... under best value, benchmarking... will inevitably converge with the requirement for external performance measurement and monitoring... Benchmarking for such goals as improved performance or organizational learning is thus subsumed under the need to comply with central government monitoring arrangements.

(Ball *et al.*, 2000, pp. 30-31)

Magd and Curry (2003, p. 261) consider the role of benchmarking in the achievement of Best Value in public sector organisations, concluding that "...in order for benchmarking to be successful in public-sector organisations, it is important to have full commitment to continuous improvement, an ability to learn from others, and a commitment to learn from others." They present five case studies, two of which mention deployment of the Excellence Model-based self-assessment, but few details of the role that the model played in these contexts are reported.

The literature includes a number of accounts of benchmarking activity elsewhere in the UK public services (see for example Berridge, Scott, Beard, & Hands, 1998; Guven-Uslu, 2005), and some which specifically describe the deployment of diagnostic benchmarking. Matykiewicz and Ashton (2005), for example, describe an attempt to introduce organisation-wide benchmarking using a workshop approach based on the National Health Service's "Essence of Care" diagnostic benchmarking tool, which succeeded in raising awareness but fell short of achieving the planned levels of implementation of the tool; they highlight the need for a receptive context for change when attempting to implement benchmarking. Watling and Pilcher (2003) describe their adaptation of the DTI's Benchmark Index to create "the Benchmark Healthcheck" and make it available through the website of the Public Sector Benchmarking Service. Appleby and Conner (2001) report on a pilot project which adapted the PROBE tool for use in healthcare settings, concluding that the adaptation was successful and represented an opportunity for healthcare staff to benefit from a user-friendly introduction to the principles of excellence.

Jackson and Bircher (2002) describe the role of the EFQM Excellence Model in "transforming a run down general practice into a leading edge primary care organisation". The research methodology is not made explicit, but this appears to be an account of an action research project, which included initiation of an annual cycle of self-assessments and adoption of some of the principles embedded in the Model into the Practice:

The team have enjoyed and are still enjoying applying the principles and rigour of the EFQM Excellence Model into their day-to-day practices... an interesting view before the practice used [the Model] was that the team felt they were performing better than they actually were... There can be no doubt that using the EFQM Excellence Model has helped the practice significantly improve its approach towards management and the delivery of excellent primary care services... it has catalysed a keen interest in improvement amongst all the team members... undertaking the necessary tasks to apply such a rigorous framework is time consuming in the first instance and adds to the workload... However, the team believe that the initial pain was definitely worth the gain.

(Jackson and Bircher, 2002, pp. 264-266)

Chapter summary

It is clear that despite widespread initial (and perhaps continuing) scepticism about their “fit” with the sector, there have been many attempts to implement quality principles within the public services, and in recent years these efforts have been strongly linked with initiatives such as Best Value and Comprehensive Performance Assessment. Benchmarking, too, is seen as a key part of the public sector “toolkit”, and there are reports of successful applications, albeit that some commentators suggest that the techniques’ effectiveness will be limited by the context and, particularly, the performance management regime.

Chapter 4 Researching Organisations: Methodology and Methods

During the first few years of my PhD studies, I gave a great deal of consideration to the available options in terms of methodology and methods, and the design of a strategy fit for the purpose of fulfilling my research aim. The main focus of my supporting studies has been on research philosophy, methodology and methods, helping me to understand the vast range of alternative stances and approaches, and that there is an intimate relationship between the research subject, the “world view” of the researcher, the questions or hypotheses constructed, and the selection and design of an appropriate methodology, strategy and methods.

In this chapter I will review the knowledge base relating to research philosophy and methodology, and define my personal stance which has underpinned my approach to the research. I will proceed to set out options that I identified and appraised for the research strategy, and to explain my chosen strategy and methods - as I designed them, and as I deployed them in practice. The chapter is structured in the following sections:

- ❑ Ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods
- ❑ Finding my own place in the research landscape
- ❑ Positioning my research: a single case study, researched through primarily qualitative methods, within a constructionist epistemology
- ❑ Rigour in qualitative research: validity, reliability and authenticity
- ❑ The researcher-research relationship: the need for reflexivity
- ❑ Research methods: data collection
- ❑ Research methods: data analysis
- ❑ My primary research design: initial planning and pilot study
- ❑ My primary research design: development and deployment
- ❑ Primary research in Organisation C
- ❑ Data collection in practice: an emergent process
- ❑ Analysing and interpreting the primary data
- ❑ Chapter summary

Ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods

Crotty (1998) describes the starting point in developing a research proposal, emphasising the importance of “...answering two questions in particular. First, what methodology and methods will we be employing in the research we propose to do? Second, how do we justify this choice and use of methodology and methods?” (p. 2). He describes (pp. 3-4) “... four elements that inform one another”, as depicted in Figure 4.1.

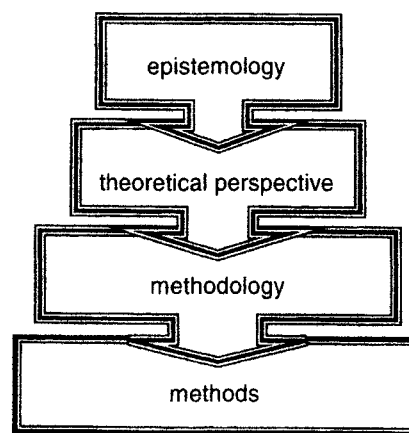
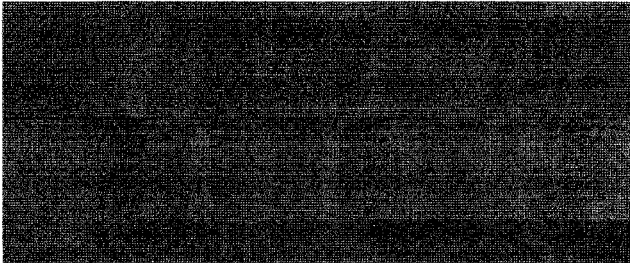
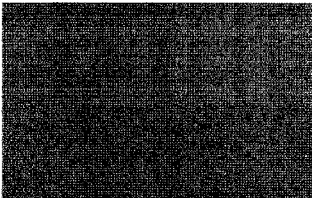


Figure 4.1: Crotty's four elements of the research process

Source: Crotty (1998, p. 4)

Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (2002, p. 57) assert that “The worldview held by an individual researcher or institute is clearly an important factor which affects the choice of research methods”, and provide their own distillation of common usage among researchers of the meanings of some key terms, omitting Crotty’s “theoretical perspective” but adding “ontology” into the hierarchy. Table 4.1 compares these authors’ definitions of these important concepts, also incorporating definitions offered by Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p. 19), and Crotty’s (1998) understanding of “ontology” which, he argues, could have been included in his own depiction (Figure 4.1), where “... it would sit alongside epistemology informing the theoretical perspective, for each theoretical perspective embodies a certain way of understanding *what is* (ontology) as well as a certain way of understanding what it means to know (epistemology).” (p. 10)

TABLE 4.1: Ontology, epistemology, methodology and method

	Crotty	Easterby-Smith et al.	Denzin & Lincoln
Ontology:	the study of being... concerned with "what is", with the nature of existence, with the structure of reality as such.	assumptions that we make about the nature of reality.	what kind of being is the human being? What is the nature of reality?
Epistemology:	the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology.	general set of assumptions about the best ways of inquiring into the nature of the world.	what is the relationship between the inquirer and the known?
Theoretical perspective:	the philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria.		
Methodology:	the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes.	combination of techniques used to enquire into a specific situation.	how do we know the world, or gain knowledge of it?
Methods:	the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data related to some research question or hypothesis.	individual techniques for data collection, analysis, etc.	

Sources: Crotty (1998, pp. 3-10); Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002, p. 31); Denzin & Lincoln (2000, p. 19)

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) broaden the terminology somewhat, while contextualising what they call “qualitative research”, and linking the philosophical framework and approach which characterise the research to the “personal biography” of the researcher:

Three interconnected, generic activities define the qualitative research process. They go by a variety of different labels, including *theory*, *method*, *analysis*, *ontology*, *epistemology*, and *methodology*. Behind these terms stands the personal biography of the researcher, who speaks from a particular class, gender, racial, cultural and ethnic community perspective. The gendered, multiculturally situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology) that he or she then examines in specific ways (methodology, analysis). That is, the researcher collects empirical materials bearing on the question and then analyzes and writes about them...

The net that contains the researcher’s epistemological, ontological, and methodological premises may be termed a paradigm, or an interpretive framework, a ‘basic set of beliefs that guide action’... All research is interpretive; it is guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied. Some beliefs may be taken for granted, invisible, only assumed, whereas others are highly problematic and controversial. Each interpretive paradigm makes particular demands on the researcher, including the questions he or she asks and the interpretations the researcher brings to them. (pp. 18-19)

Crotty (1998) bemoans the tendency of some social research texts to confuse the various research elements:

It is not uncommon to find, say, symbolic interactionism [a theoretical perspective], ethnography [a methodology] and constructionism [an epistemology] simply set side by side as ‘methodologies’, ‘approaches’, ‘perspectives’, or something similar. Yet they are not truly comparable. Lumping them together without distinction is a bit like talking about putting tomato sauce, condiments and groceries in one basket. One feels compelled to say, ‘Hang on a moment! Tomato sauce is one of many forms of condiment. And all condiments are groceries. Let’s do some sorting out here.’ (p. 3)

Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002) have attempted such a “sorting out”, providing a useful summary of ontologies and epistemologies in science and social science (Table 4.2).

TABLE 4.2: Ontologies and epistemologies in science and social science

<i>Ontology of science</i>	Traditional Realism	Internal Realism	Relativism	
<i>Ontology of social science</i>		Representationalism	Relativism	Nominalism
<i>Truth</i>	is established by correspondence between observations and phenomena.	is determined through verifications of predictions.	requires consensus between different viewpoints.	depends upon who establishes it.
<i>Facts</i>	are concrete.	are concrete, but cannot be accessed directly.	depend on viewpoint of observer.	are all human creations.
<i>Epistemology of science</i>	Positivism		Relativism	
<i>Epistemology of social science</i>		Positivism	Relativism	Social Constructionism

Source: Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002, p. 33)

It is notable that, at this level of depiction of the research landscape, the words “qualitative” and “quantitative” do not appear - is this not, then, the great divide between different research traditions that some would have us believe? Crotty (1998, p. 15) is very clear on this point:

...the distinction between qualitative research and quantitative research occurs at the level of methods [not] at the level of epistemology or theoretical perspective. What does occur back there at those exalted levels is a distinction between objectivist/positivist research, on the one hand, and constructionist or subjectivist research, on the other. Yet in most research textbooks, it is qualitative research and quantitative that are set against each other as polar opposites...

...this divide - objectivist research associated with quantitative methods over against constructionist or subjectivist research associated with qualitative methods - is far from justified. Most methodologies known today as forms of 'qualitative research' have in the past been carried out in an utterly empiricist, positivist manner... On the other hand, quantification is by no means ruled out within non-positivist research.

Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002) concur that quantitative and qualitative research methods need not be inextricably linked to one or other philosophical position. They point out (p. 28), in relation to the two philosophical traditions of positivism and social constructionism, that "...even self-confessed extremists do not hold consistently to one position or the other... there are many researchers, especially in the management field, who adopt a pragmatic view by deliberately combining methods drawn from both traditions."

This is not to say, however, that there is no "great divide" at all. The world of research may not be clearly divided into "quantitative" and "qualitative" methods (or approaches, or philosophies... or, perhaps, people), but it is (or perhaps we should say it should be) clearly divided:

What would seem to be problematic is any attempt to be at once objectivist and constructionist (or subjectivist). On the face of it, to say that there is objective meaning and, in the same breath, to say that there is no objective meaning certainly does appear contradictory... we will need to be consistently objectivist or consistently constructionist...

If we seek to be consistently objectivist, we will distinguish scientifically established objective meanings from subjective meanings that people hold in everyday fashion and that at best "reflect" or "mirror" or "approximate" objective meanings. We will accept, of course, that these subjective meanings are important in people's lives and we may adopt qualitative methods of ascertaining what those meanings are. This is epistemologically consistent. It has a downside, all the same. It makes people's everyday understandings inferior, epistemologically, to more scientific understandings. In this way of viewing things, one cannot predicate of people's everyday understandings the truth claims one makes for what is scientifically established.

Chapter 4 Researching organisations: methodology and methods

If we seek to be consistently constructionist, we will put all understandings, scientific and non-scientific alike, on the very same footing. They are all constructions. None is objective or absolute or truly generalisable. Scientific knowledge is just a particular form of constructed knowledge designed to serve particular purposes - and, yes, it serves them well. Constructionists may indeed make use of quantitative methods but their constructionism makes a difference... for a start, it makes a big difference to the truth claims proffered... all the more so as one moves towards subjectivism rather than constructionism. No longer is there talk of objectivity, or validity, or generalisability. For all that, there is ample recognition that, after its own fashion, quantitative research has valuable contributions to make...

(Crotty, 1998, pp. 15-16)

Finding my own place in the research landscape

Guided by these ideas, and others drawn from my reading and studies about methodology and methods, I have sought to find and understand my own place in the philosophical and methodological landscape. The process of reflecting upon my own “worldview” has been a fascinating and energising aspect of my PhD programme, facilitated by my supporting studies and supervisory team, and has exerted a major influence upon the research programme itself.

If I had begun my PhD at a younger age, my inclination would have been to adopt a strongly quantitative approach, rooted in a positivistic philosophical stance. In truth, if my PhD studies had followed soon after I completed my Bachelors and Masters degrees, I may not have considered any alternatives, and would have seen the design of a questionnaire and its use in a large-scale survey as the natural and “valid” way to research the uptake and effectiveness of a benchmarking technique. Several “drivers” would have led me to adopt such an approach. Firstly, my educational and professional “upbringing”, which was primarily scientific and mathematical – maths and science A-levels, followed by an Engineering first degree and Masters at an “old” university, and an early career in production engineering roles - did much to ingrain the “scientific method” and view of “validity”. Secondly, the traditions of the subject area itself – “benchmarking” is generally regarded as a subset of “quality management”, which itself has roots in the field of “operations management” - are primarily positivistic and quantitative.

However, by the time I registered for the PhD and began to develop my initial project proposal, my worldview had shifted quite markedly. A move from Engineering into a management consultancy role (in the mid 1980s) probably planted the seeds of this shift. Some aspects of the consultancy role tended to reinforce a rational, scientific, structured way of thinking and working; but other aspects challenged it. In particular, a unique opportunity that came my way in 1988, to spend two months in Japan being immersed in Kawasaki Heavy Industries’ approach to “Just in Time” manufacturing and continuous improvement exposed me to some lessons that had a profound effect upon me. The penny that dropped in my mind, while I was on the shop floor of a motorcycle factory, was the

crucial importance in Kawasaki's success of their approach to the *behavioural* aspects of the work, as well as (and, perhaps, over and above) the technical aspects. Soon afterwards, a move into academia exposed me to further influences, of researchers and research from different traditions; the experience of supervising other researchers, some of who have adopted more inductive methodologies; and reading undertaken in the course of my research, publication and supervisory work. Over the years, I have gradually become convinced that the future development and success of "my" subject area - the spread of good practice and effective organisational improvement - depends upon our ability to deploy knowledge and approaches which have been developed through the traditions of the social sciences, to complement and enhance the progress that has already been made on developing technical aspects and understanding of "best practice." And that at this point in time, for this researcher, my worldview is aligned with a social constructionist epistemology.

This realisation had dawned on me by the time I registered for my PhD in May 1999, but at that stage my understanding of research philosophy and methodology was quite limited. In hindsight, I do not think that I realised just how limited it was - I "didn't know what I didn't know" in this field. My instincts, life experience and developing knowledge about research were all drawing me away from my roots in positivism, but I would not have been able at that time to explain or rationalise this repositioning in anything other than fairly vague terms. Nevertheless, I knew that a "qualitative" and "inductive" approach felt right to me, and this influenced me, as I developed and refined my PhD research, to focus on an aspect of diagnostic benchmarking that would benefit from deployment of an inductive research methodology, focusing on the collection and interpretation of primarily qualitative primary data. The fascination that drove my desire to research my subject was a fascination with the meaning that diagnostic benchmarking held for the people involved, not with the facts and figures and statistics of how many people and organisations were using the technique and what benefits they appeared to be achieving "at face value." I believed that an inductive approach had the potential to achieve a breakthrough in our understanding of the benefits, and potential benefits, that diagnostic benchmarking is capable of delivering to organisations. Hence my PhD research could make a substantial, valuable contribution to

the field of diagnostic benchmarking, in the broader context of business excellence and organisational improvement and development.

My supervisors and I devised a programme of supporting studies that would assist me to deepen my understanding of research philosophy and methodology, and during the first several years of my part-time PhD studies this was the main focus of my work. This enabled me to construct, refine and deploy a research strategy that was epistemologically sound and well-suited to achieve my research aim, as described in the following sections of this chapter.

Positioning my research: a single case study, researched through primarily qualitative methods, within a constructionist epistemology

Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 19) describe a number of “valid reasons for doing qualitative research”, which include “... the conviction of the researcher based upon research experience... [and] ...to uncover and understand any phenomenon about which little is yet known.... [and] ...to gain novel and fresh slants on things about which quite a bit is already known.” As I embarked upon my PhD “journey”, this summed up precisely my perception of the current state of knowledge about diagnostic benchmarking – we apparently knew quite a lot about the technique and its effects, but in fact knew very little about *how* (and, perhaps, *whether*, or at least *how well*) it really works. A fresh “slant” was needed.

Symon and Cassell (1998) cite Henwood and Pidgeon’s (1995, p. 116) argument that, in psychology:

...there are two particular issues...that enhanced use of the ‘qualitative paradigm’, as they call it, can address. Firstly, they suggest that an overemphasis on theory testing, as is typically the case within traditional approaches... can produce a worrying underemphasis on the systematic generation of new theory... qualitative methods can ...counteract [this] perceived current imbalance. Secondly... qualitative approaches, with their emphasis on exploring the research participants’ own situated experiences, offset the critique of much psychological research that the richness and significance of individual experience is neglected in favour of overarching reductionist explanations.

(Symon & Cassell, 1998, pp. 1-2)

In my view, the need to move beyond “reductionist explanations” was a characteristic of the current state of the art in the field of business excellence in general and diagnostic benchmarking in particular. The case for me to deploy a primarily qualitative approach, within the framework of a constructionist epistemology, was strong.

After a lot of consideration, my chosen approach was to focus on a single case study, exploring it in substantial depth to obtain insights into why and how the chosen

organisation made use of diagnostic benchmarking; what occurred when they did; with what consequences; and with what meanings for the people involved. My data collection strategy would combine examination of relevant documentation (e.g. organisational policy, progress reports, performance data); with collection of the experiences and stories and opinions of people who had been and were involved in the organisation's use of diagnostic benchmarking; with (if possible) direct observation of the diagnostic benchmarking process in action.

This focus on a single organisation embodied my commitment to obtaining a real depth of data, analysis and understanding of the phenomena surrounding diagnostic benchmarking. I seriously considered the alternative of undertaking several case studies, and indeed I was encouraged to consider this option by the panel at my Mid Point Review. However, as described below, my review of the literature about methodology and methods, experience from a pilot deployment of my research methods, and in-depth discussions with my supervision team, convinced me that gathering "shallower" data from a larger number of organisations would have constrained my ability to derive and synthesise a new contribution to knowledge in the field.

I also considered the possibility (highlighted by Robson (2002, pp. 179-180) as a common view "until recently" of a legitimate use of case studies) of combining the strengths of the case study approach (depth, discovery, interpretation) with those of the survey (breadth, generalisability), by first completing a case study and then following it with a survey to test whether the findings from the case study reflected experiences in other organisations. I rejected this alternative for the same reasons which led me to reject the alternative of multiple case studies - it would inevitably have constrained the depth and rigour with which I could study the case organisation. It would also have required me within my research to "wear two hats" in terms of epistemological stance; something which I felt would be inappropriate and inconsistent with my world view and self awareness as a researcher, and not conducive to optimising the quality and rigour of my research.

A consequence of my chosen strategy, and of my theoretical perspective, was that I did not anticipate making claims of generalisability of my findings and conclusions. My principal

aim was to achieve in-depth insights, to surface and report and interpret the meanings that experiences of diagnostic benchmarking held for those who were experiencing it, and I was (and remain) content to acknowledge that generalisability was not achievable in this context. Nor would a quest for generalisability be consistent with my epistemological stance. My research would aim to break new ground by advancing understanding of the role that diagnostic benchmarking can play and has played in a particular situation within a particular timeframe; I would leave it to others to explore whether and how this role would be similar or different in other situations at other times.

Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002, p. 55) map research designs onto a two-dimensional grid (Figure 4.2). They place “case method” at two different points on the grid: in the “top-right” quadrant (social constructionist, with the researcher independent of/detached from the subject(s) of the research) according to Yin’s (1993; 1994) stance regarding case studies; and in the “bottom-right” quadrant (social constructionist, with the researcher “involved”) according to Stake’s (1995) view.

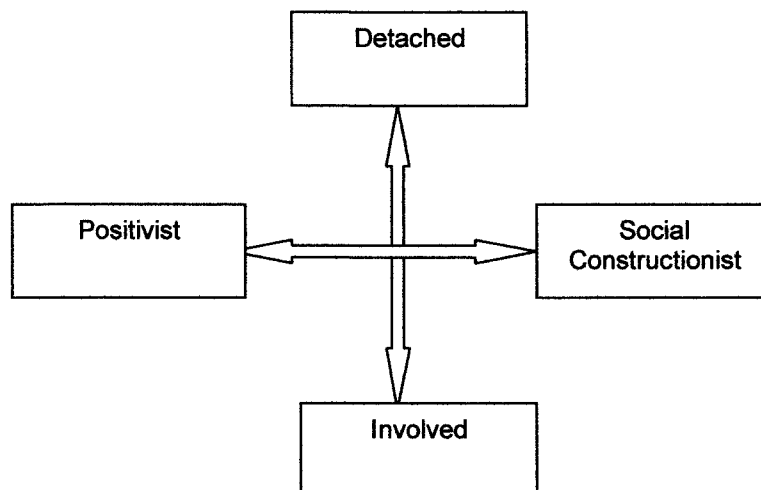


Figure 4.2: Matrix of research philosophies

Source: Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002, p. 55)

Stake (1995, p. xi) pinpoints the circumstances in which case studies are most useful:

A case study is expected to catch the complexity of a single case. A single leaf, even a single toothpick, has unique complexities - but rarely will we care enough to submit it to case study. We study a case when it itself is of very special interest. We look for the detail of interaction with its contexts. Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances.

Bell (1993, p. 8) highlights capabilities of case studies that might lead a researcher to select this approach over some of the alternatives, focusing on their strength in allowing the researcher to concentrate on a specific instance or situation "...and to identify, or attempt to identify, the various interactive processes at work. These processes may remain hidden in a large-scale survey but may be crucial to the success or failure of systems or organizations."

Yin (2003, p. 2) reports that case studies have been increasingly used as a research tool (e.g. Hamel, 1992; Perry & Kraemer, 1986), but warns that:

The case study has long been (and continues to be) stereotyped as a weak sibling among social science methods... Case studies have... been denigrated as having insufficient precision (i.e. quantification), objectivity or rigour. [However]... the stereotype of the case study method may be wrong... the continuing relevance of the method suggests that we have misunderstood its strengths and weaknesses.

(Yin, 2003, pp. xiii-xiv)

Robson (2002, pp. 179-180) reinforces the notion that the case study has been stereotyped as a somewhat inferior approach, noting that it was "...until recently commonly considered in methodology texts as a kind of 'soft option', possibly admissible as an exploratory precursor to some more 'hard-nosed' experiment or survey, or as a complement to such approaches, but of dubious value by itself." He argues that case study should be seen as a fully legitimate alternative to experimentation when applied well and in appropriate circumstances: "*The central point is that case study is not a flawed experimental design; it is a fundamentally different research strategy with its own designs.*"

Yin (2003, p. 1) sees case studies as the preferred strategy “when *how* or *why* questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within [a] real-life context”; the desire to understand complex social phenomena gives rise to the distinctive need for the case study method, which:

... allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events – such as individual life-cycles, organizational and managerial processes, neighborhood change, international relations, and the maturation of industries... There may be exploratory case studies, descriptive case studies, or explanatory case studies. (Yin, 2003, pp. 2-3).

Stake (2000) sees case study not as a methodological choice, but a choice:

...of what is to be studied. By whatever methods, we choose to study the case. We could study it analytically or holistically, entirely by repeated measures or hermeneutically¹⁷, organically or culturally, and by mixed methods - but we concentrate, at least for the time being, on the case... Some of us emphasize the name *case study* because it draws attention to the question of what specially can be learned from the single case. (Stake, 2000, pp. 435-436)

Yin (2003) summarises relevant situations for different research strategies (Table 4.3), and suggests, for example, that:

... if you wanted to know the ‘what’ outcomes of a new governmental program... you could answer this question by doing a survey or by examining economic data... But if you needed to know ‘how’ or ‘why’ the program had worked (or not), you would lean towards either a case study or a field experiment (Yin, 2003, p. 7).

Yin (2003, p. 8) highlights the case study’s unique strength: “its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence – documents, artefacts, interviews and observations”, but warns (p. 10) that too many case study investigators have been sloppy, have failed to follow systematic procedures, or have allowed equivocal evidence or biased views to influence the findings and conclusions.

¹⁷ Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) explain that “The critical hermeneutic tradition...holds that in qualitative research there is only interpretation, no matter how vociferously many researchers may argue that the facts speak for themselves.” (p. 285)

TABLE 4.3: Relevant situations for different research strategies

<i>Strategy</i>	Form of research question	Requires control of behavioral events?	Focuses on contemporary events?
Experiment	How, why?	Yes	Yes
Survey	Who, what, where, how many, how much?	No	Yes
Archival analysis	Who, what, where, how many, how much?	No	Yes/no
History	How, why?	No	No
Case study	How, why?	No	Yes

Source: Yin (2003, p. 5)

Yin (2003, pp. 39-42) identifies four types of case study design:

- ❑ Single case, single unit of analysis ('single-case (holistic)')
- ❑ Single case, multiple units of analysis ('single-case (embedded)')
- ❑ Multiple cases, each with single unit of analysis ('multiple-case (holistic)')
- ❑ Multiple cases, each with multiple units of analysis ('multiple-case (embedded)')

He argues that, for every type of design, there will be a need to analyse contextual conditions in relation to the case; and offers various rationales for studying single cases:

- ❑ A single case might represent the *critical case* in testing a well-formulated theory;
- ❑ It might represent an *extreme* case or a *unique* case;
- ❑ It could be the *representative* or *typical* case – the objective being '... to capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday or commonplace situation';
- ❑ Or it could be the *revelatory* case – when an investigator '... has an opportunity to observe and analyze a phenomenon previously inaccessible to scientific investigation'.

As I planned my primary research, I concluded that its characteristics corresponded closely with some of the key features that Yin and Stake are highlighting as indicators of the appropriateness of the case study approach:

- ❑ the focus of my research would be on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context
- ❑ the questions I was addressing were about “whether” and “how” diagnostic benchmarking acts as an enabler of organisational improvement (rather than being “what” or “how much” questions)
- ❑ as the investigator, I would have little or no control over the events that comprised the focus of my research
- ❑ it would be vital to the achievement of my research aim for me to be able to capture and understand the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events, including organisational and managerial processes and characteristics
- ❑ I anticipated being able to draw upon a wide variety of evidence – documents, artefacts, interviews and observations - in the setting of an organisation that had been and/or was currently involved in deploying diagnostic benchmarking
- ❑ I hoped to be able to negotiate access to an organisation that had deployed/was deploying diagnostic benchmarking on multiple occasions and/or in multiple locations (e.g. several different departments or sites), so I anticipated that my case study would match Yin’s definition of a “single case, single unit of analysis”, or perhaps a “single case, multiple units of analysis.”
- ❑ If indeed I was able to work with such an organisation, I knew that this would be quite an unusual situation, as the majority of users of such tools have used them only once; hence, it might be what Yin describes as an *extreme* case. Equally, given the paucity of existing research that had been published about diagnostic benchmarking, it could be what Yin describes as a *revelatory* case.

However, I felt that, epistemologically, I was potentially at odds with Yin’s suggestion (2003, p. 14) that the case study is “[an inquiry which] benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis”; and his positioning of the

case study (according to Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2002, p. 55) as a study in which the researcher is independent of/detached from the subject(s) of the research. In these senses, my research design and philosophy would be closer to Stake's "social constructionist, with the researcher 'involved'" stance. Stake (1995) elaborates that the case researcher plays a number of different roles, and has options about how to play them:

The roles may include teacher, participant observer, interviewer, storyteller, advocate, artist, counselor, evaluator, consultant, and others. Although the rules of research oftentimes seem prescribed and restrictive, the styles researchers follow in designing, studying, writing, and consulting vary considerably. Each researcher consciously or unconsciously makes continuous decisions about how much emphasis to give each role... (Stake, 1995, p. 91)

... The researcher, deliberately or intuitively, makes role choices in addition to [these] six... These include the following:

- a. How much to participate personally in the activity of the case
 - b. How much to pose as an expert, how much comprehension to reveal
 - c. Whether to be neutral observer or evaluative, critical analyst
 - d. How much to try to serve the needs of anticipated readers
 - e. How much to provide interpretations about the case
 - f. How much to advocate a position
 - g. Whether or not to tell it as a story
- (Stake, 1995, p. 103)

Writing a few years later, Stake (2000) highlights a key epistemological question: "What can be learned from the single case?"; and emphasises designing the study to optimise understanding of the case rather than generalisation beyond. He expands on the theme:

Ultimately, we may be interested in a general phenomenon or a population of cases more than in the individual case. And we cannot understand this case without knowing about other cases. But while we are studying it, our meager resources are concentrated on trying to understand *its* complexities. (p. 436)

Yin (2003, p. 10) recognises the same concern:

‘How can you generalize from a single case?’... The short answer is that case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes. In this sense, the case study, like the experiment, does not represent a ‘sample’, and in doing a case study, your goal will be to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization). Or, as three notable social scientists describe in their *single* case study done years ago, the goal is to do a ‘generalizing’ and not a ‘particularizing’ analysis (Lipset, Trow, & Coleman, 1956, pp. 419-420).

Stake (2000) says of “intrinsic” casework “My emphasis is on learning the most about both the individual case and the phenomenon, especially the latter if the special circumstances may yield unusual insight into an issue.” (p. 450). He argues that:

Most academic researchers are supportive of the study of cases only if there is clear expectation of generalizability... Case study research has been constrained even by qualitative methodologists who grant less than full regard to study of the particular (Denzin, 1989; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Herriott & Firestone, 1983; Yin, 1989). These and other social scientists have written... as if intrinsic study of a particular case is not as important as studies to obtain generalizations pertaining to a population of cases... case study method has been too little honored as the intrinsic study of a valued particular, as it is in biography, institutional self-study, program evaluation, therapeutic practice, and many lines of work. Generalization should not be emphasized in all research (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991; Simons, 1980) (Stake, 2000, p. 439).

As I have previously noted, in my own research I was not setting out on a quest for conclusions that would be generalisable to other settings, although Yin’s suggestion that one could aspire to “generaliz[e] to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes...” would be a better fit with my intentions. It seemed to me that a single case study-based approach would be a very appropriate element of my research strategy. Careful design and deployment would be needed, however, to avoid the pitfalls such as the “sloppiness” of which Yin (2003, p. 10) warns.

Rigour in qualitative research: validity, reliability and authenticity

Inductive, qualitative research has many detractors. Peck and Secker (1999) outline many disadvantages of qualitative research, including the time-consuming nature of data collection, the long timescales involved, the inaccessibility of the style in which the findings are usually published and the media (typically academic journals) through which they are disseminated. These disadvantages are obstacles to acceptance and impact of qualitative research on decision-making, over and above the “continuing dominance of positivist, quantitative approaches” in the world in which these authors operate, the “pragmatic world of healthcare management.” (Peck & Secker, 1999, p. 552)

Miles (1979) uses an interesting metaphor to highlight some problems and challenges, in his article “Qualitative data as an attractive nuisance: the problem of analysis”:

The legal doctrine of an “attractive nuisance” is simply illustrated by what happens if you abandon a car in your back yard: if neighboring children come eagerly to play in it, you are liable for their injuries. Qualitative data collected during the study of organizations fit this illustration well: there are many reasons why more and more researchers are currently seeking such data, and there are many ways they can get hurt - or at least fail to achieve their purposes, and just as most children think that driving is easy, so many researchers somehow think that qualitative data present few problematic methodological issues. (p. 590)

Miles argues that some problematic issues do indeed present themselves, including that:

Collecting and analyzing the data is a highly labor-intensive operation, often generating much stress ... Qualitative data tend to overload the researcher badly at almost every point: the sheer range of phenomena to be observed, the recorded volume of notes, the time required for the write-up, coding, and analysis can all become overwhelming. But the most serious and central difficulty in the use of qualitative data is that methods of analysis are not well formulated... the analyst faced with a bank of qualitative data has very few guidelines for protection against self-delusion, let alone the presentation of ‘unreliable’ or ‘invalid’ conclusions to scientific or policy-making audiences. How can we be sure that an ‘earthy’, ‘undeniable’, ‘serendipitous’ finding is not, in fact, *wrong*? (Miles, 1979, p. 590)

Stake (1995, pp. 45-46), while advocating the use of case studies and qualitative methods, explicitly recognises some of their “faults”:

Qualitative study has everything wrong with it that its detractors claim... [it] is subjective. New puzzles are produced more frequently than solutions to old ones. Its contributions to disciplined science are slow and tendentious¹⁸. The results pay off little in the advancement of social practice... ethical risks are substantial... the cost in time and money is... very high...

...Many qualitative studies are personalistic studies. Impersonal issues applied to carefully observed human beings become personal issues. Privacy is always at risk. Entrapment is always on the horizon as the researcher, although a dedicated non-interventionist, raises questions and options not previously considered by the respondent. Some of us ‘go native’, accommodating to the viewpoint and valuation of the people at the site - then revert, reacting less in their favor when back again with academic colleagues... Choosing to go qualitative is not simply a matter of whether the gains in perspective are worth these costs. The attraction of intensive and interpretive study are ever apparent... Humans generally are curious, and researchers have a special compunction to inquire... There are times when all researchers are going to be interpretive, holistic, naturalistic, and uninterested in cause, and then, by definition, they will be qualitative inquirers. (pp. 45-46)

A potential specific criticism of research based on primarily qualitative data drawn from a single case study is that the findings and conclusions will lack “validity”. However, to accept this suggestion wholesale would be to apply the rules of large-scale, quantitative, positivistic research validity, even when what we’re actually doing is smaller-scale, primarily qualitative research from an interpretive stance. Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002, p. 53) highlight “...an underlying anxiety amongst researchers of all persuasions that the research will not stand up to outside scrutiny”, and introduce the terms “validity”, “reliability” and “generalizability” as technical language for examining this problem. They suggest that the meaning of these terms can vary depending upon the philosophical viewpoint adopted, as illustrated in Table 4.4.

¹⁸ “tendentious” is defined by the Collins Dictionary as “having or showing an intentional tendency or bias, especially a controversial one.”

TABLE 4.4: Perspectives on validity, reliability and generalizability

Viewpoint	Positivist	Relativist	Constructionist
<i>Validity</i>	Do the measures correspond closely to reality?	Have a sufficient number of perspectives been included?	Does the study clearly gain access to the experiences of those in the research setting?
<i>Reliability</i>	Will the measures yield the same results on other occasions?	Will similar observations be reached by other observers?	Is there transparency in how sense was made from the raw data?
<i>Generalizability</i>	To what extent does the study confirm or contradict existing findings in the same field?	What is the probability that patterns observed in the sample will be repeated in the general population?	Do the concepts and constructs derived from this study have any relevance to other settings?

Source: Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2000, p. 53)

They point out that the language and ideas of “validity” and “reliability” were initially developed in quantitative social science, and that classic text books on methodology distinguish between “construct”, “internal” and “external” validity (with “construct validity” being a similar concept to “validity” in Table 4.4, and “external validity” being similar to “generalizability”).

Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002, pp. 53-54) suggest that text books have tended to neglect issues of validity in relation to what they call the “relativist position”, but that this is an important issue because this perspective “...is concerned with issues of whether the research procedures can provide an accurate representation of reality.” They suggest that Yin (1994) is operating from a realist ontology and a relativist position when he defends the case method by stressing the importance of building cases over time in order to eliminate alternative explanations (thus demonstrating internal validity); but that Yin moves towards the constructionist position when he points out that case studies rely on analytic rather than statistical generalisations.

There could be a temptation for researchers with relativist or constructivist stances to claim immunity from addressing issues of validity, reliability or generalisability; to regard such issues as irrelevant. Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002, p. 54) note the existence of such attitudes:

There has been some reluctance to apply ideas of validity and reliability to interpretative and social constructionist research, because they might imply acceptance of one absolute (positivist) reality. However, as qualitative methods become increasingly mainstream... constructionist research must develop the power to convince examiners, professionals and the wider public that their results should be taken seriously.

They cite Silverman (2000), who "...believes that qualitative methods in general are in danger of being dismissed as undisciplined journalism because there are few safeguards to prevent researchers from picking evidence out of the mass of data to support their particular prejudices" (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2002, p. 54). Symon and Cassell (1998, p. 6) also note Silverman's (1993) "discomfort" with much of the qualitative research published in leading academic journals, listing a number of concerns including the tendency for "... use of data-extracts which support the researcher's argument, without any proof that contrary evidence has been reviewed." Symon and Cassell highlight Johnson (1998) and Silvester (1998) as authors who review and debate negative instances "... in a manner which strengthens their 'truth claims.'" They highlight a key question, which:

...concerns the criteria against which the findings of qualitative research are evaluated. The traditional criteria on which research is evaluated stem from a positivist paradigm where tests of reliability and validity of the data are seen as integral to the 'rigorous' conduct of research. Some qualitative researchers seek to apply these criteria to their own work using... techniques, such as inter-rater reliability (King, 1994)... However, assessing the output from qualitative techniques on the criteria generated to assess quantitative techniques created problems for other qualitative researchers... the role of epistemological and ontological assumptions is significant. From alternative perspectives such criteria are unobtainable and not necessarily desirable, as research outcomes are viewed as the result of the interaction between the respondent and the researcher. It is argued within these paradigms that analysis is an interpretive process which precludes the very idea of 'scientific objectivity' as implied by reliability and validity.

(Symon & Cassell, 1998, p. 6)

Crotty (1998, pp. 47-48) challenges the concept of “validity” within a context of constructionism:

...it is possible to make sense of the same reality in different ways... Moving from one culture to another, as no doubt most of us have done at one time or another, provides evidence enough that strikingly diverse understandings can be formed of the same phenomenon. Yet there are always some who stand ready to dismiss other interpretations as merely quaint viewpoints that throw the ‘true’ or ‘valid’ interpretation into clearer relief. What constructionism drives home unambiguously is that there is *no* true or valid interpretation. There are useful interpretations, to be sure, and these stand over against interpretations that appear to serve no useful purpose. There are liberating forms of interpretation too; they contrast sharply with interpretations that prove oppressive. There are even interpretations that may be judged fulfilling and rewarding - in contradistinction to interpretations that impoverish human existence and stunt human growth. ‘Useful’, ‘liberating’, ‘fulfilling’, ‘rewarding’ interpretations, yes. ‘True’ or ‘valid’ interpretations, no.

Symon and Cassell, however, point out that most qualitative researchers do wish to find some way of justifying their interpretations of their data; some have developed alternative criteria which are better suited to assessing the “rigour” of qualitative research. They highlight Guba and Lincoln’s (1989) “authenticity criteria” as the best known of these:

These authenticity criteria are explicitly formulated to reflect the concerns of alternative paradigms:

1. **resonance** (the extent to which the research process reflects the underlying paradigm);
 2. **rhetoric** (the strength of the presenting argument);
 3. **empowerment** (the extent to which the findings enable readers to take action);
 4. **applicability** (the extent to which readers can apply the findings to their own contexts)
- (Symon & Cassell, 1998, p. 7)

Lincoln and Guba (2000) elaborate upon their own authenticity criteria (published 11 years previously):

The criteria were... rooted in the axioms and assumptions of the constructivist paradigm, insofar as we could extrapolate and infer them... we believed them to be hallmarks of authentic, trustworthy, rigorous or 'valid' constructivist or phenomenological inquiry... [they] were fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, pp. 245-51). *Fairness* was thought to be a quality of balance; that is, all stakeholder views, perspectives, claims, concerns, and voices should be apparent in the text. Omission of stakeholder or participant voices reflects, we believe, a form of bias. This bias, however, was and is not related directly to the concerns of objectivity that flow from positivist inquiry and that are reflective of inquirer blindness or subjectivity. Rather, this fairness was defined by deliberate attempts to prevent marginalization, to act affirmatively with respect to inclusion, and to act with energy to ensure that all voices in the inquiry effort had a chance to be represented in any texts and to have their stories treated fairly and with balance.

Ontological and educative authenticity were designated as criteria for determining a raised level of awareness, in the first instance, by individual research participants and, in the second, by individuals about those who surround them or with whom they come into contact for some social or organizational purpose. Although we failed to see it at that particular historical moment (1989), there is no reason these criteria cannot be – at this point in time, with many miles under our theoretic and practice feet – reflective also of Schwandt's (1996) 'critical intelligence', or capacity to engage in moral critique. In fact, the authenticity criteria we originally proposed had strong moral and ethical overtones, a point to which we later returned... It was a point to which our critics strongly objected before we were sufficiently self-aware to realize the implications of what we had proposed (see, for instance, Sechrest, 1993).

Catalytic and tactical authenticities refer to the ability of a given inquiry to prompt, first, action on the part of research participants, and second, the involvement of the researcher/evaluator in training participants in specific forms of social and political action if participants desire such training. It is here that constructivist inquiry practice begins to resemble forms of critical theorist action, action research, or participative or cooperative

inquiry, each of which is predicated on creating the capacity in research participants for positive social change and forms of emancipatory community action. It is also at this specific point that practitioners of positivist and postpositivist social inquiry are the most critical, because any action on the part of the inquirer is thought to destabilize objectivity and introduce subjectivity, resulting in bias.

The problem of subjectivity and bias has a long theoretical history... For purposes of this discussion, it is enough to say that we are persuaded that objectivity is a chimera: a mythological creature that never existed, save in the imaginations of those who believe that knowing can be separated from the knower. (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, pp. 180-181)

These “authenticity criteria”, then, offer a means by which I, and others, can evaluate my research, and make judgements about the quality of the research design, and about the effectiveness of my implementation of that design. A means by which we can test the value, the worth, the integrity of the research - whether it has been well designed and conducted - using criteria which are consistent with the paradigmatic context in which the research has been conducted. In formulating my primary research design, described later in this chapter, I have used Guba and Lincoln’s authenticity criteria as a set of guiding principles:

- Having articulated the epistemological positioning which underpins my research (social constructionism), I have sought to ensure that the research process that I have designed and deployed is fully consistent with and reflective of this stance - hence achieving what Guba and Lincoln call *resonance*. I have paid particular attention in this context to issues of *fairness* - ensuring that all available stakeholder views, perspectives, claims, concerns, and voices are both heard (by me) within the data collection process, and apparent in this text so that they are also “heard” (or, rather, read) by those who read my research outputs - and *ontological and educative authenticity* - ensuring that my research process is transparent to and fully understood by the research participants such that, for those who are sufficiently interested and motivated to engage in this way, the research process in itself might

be somewhat educative for the participants, and contribute to a raised level of ontological and social/organisational awareness.

- ❑ My research process must also pass the test of *rhetoric*, articulating the arguments that arise from the findings in such a way that those arguments are understood by my readers to be both strong and authentic. To achieve this, my design would need to enable me to reach participants and other data sources that would reveal multiple facets of the organisation's experiences of diagnostic benchmarking, and to provide opportunities for their voices and messages to be fully incorporated into the findings, interpretations, conclusions and arguments that I put forward as arising from the research.
- ❑ The criterion of *empowerment* requires that my readers learn something from reading my findings and conclusions that will enable them to take action. Bearing in mind Guba and Lincoln's emphasis on *catalytic and tactical authenticities*, I believe that the issue of empowerment applies to my research participants as well as to other readers. I was clear as I designed the research that I did not intend for it to be "action research" as such, in that I would not be setting out to facilitate changes in order to study their effects. Nevertheless, my research would empower its participants and other readers in that its findings and conclusions would be instructive and useful to them as they reflected upon their experiences and perceptions of diagnostic benchmarking, and contemplated future actions.
- ❑ My research findings should also be *applicable*, in the sense that readers can apply them to their own contexts. At first sight, this criterion sounds a bit like a requirement for generalisability. However, as I interpret it, it is rather a requirement that I, as the researcher and author, should present my findings in such a way that the reader is able to fully understand both the findings themselves and the context from which those findings have been drawn, and to draw their own conclusions about the meaning that these findings might have in other contexts including their own.

The researcher-research relationship: the need for reflexivity

A further consideration is the role of myself, as the researcher, within the research. Some researchers would pursue the aim of being completely neutral and objective within their research, not in any way influencing the respondents or “tainting” their views. Within the positivistic paradigm, this would tend to be seen as an appropriate aim. Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002, p. 59) note that most positivist researchers tend not to self-disclose, and attribute this to the belief that disclosure (or “admission”) of personal motives and aspirations may be perceived as damaging to the image of independence and objectivity which is important in the context of positivist research. Similarly, it would be rare for a positivist researcher to explain where their ideas have come from, or why a particular set of questions is being posed. However, they suggest that (“fortunately”) things are beginning to change:

... for two reasons. First, because social studies of the development of scientific knowledge ... have started to show that the formal view of scientific progress is at variance with what most scientists do in practice. Second, because there is a growing acceptance among social scientists of the need to be reflexive about their own work, and this has led to more autobiographical accounts of research in practice. (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2002, p. 59)

Nason and Golding (1998) describe the recognition of the reflexivity of the researcher as central to good ethnographic accounts, pointing out that the researcher cannot be a “fly on the wall” because they themselves are part of the research process:

... we would argue that an ethnographer must be reflexive, i.e. they must attempt to understand how their own ‘philosophical bias’ underpins the ‘theory laden’ nature of how they make sense of what they observe (Gill & Johnson, 1991). That is to say they must attempt to understand how their prior values and knowledge influence what they see whilst observing. An exploration of the researcher’s ontological and epistemological beliefs can often provide a good framework to develop and make explicit such reflexivity.

(Nason & Golding, 1998, p. 241)

Waring, Mavin and Bryans (2004) suggest that the discipline of management research has tended to adopt methods “grounded in the objectivist scientific view with a heavy focus on empirical data” (p. 1), and has a long way to go in terms of building reflexivity into the mainstream. Symon and Cassell (1998, p. 2) summarise a postmodernist critique of the classical natural science methodology “...upon which the positivism of social science is based”, challenging positivism’s assumption that sense data can be accumulated that “...allow us to neutrally apprehend an external and independently existing social/natural reality.” This would make possible separation of the knower (subject) from the known (object), with the knower describing the known through theory-neutral observational language, but it is the possibility of such a subject-object dualism that postmodernist epistemologies and ontologies question.

Kildruff and Mehra explain that:

Instead of trying to erase all personal traces of the researcher from the work so as to provide the reader with an illusion of unmediated access to the subject, postmodernists seek to demystify the technology of mediation by explicitly detailing the involvement of the researcher. (Kildruff & Mehra, 1997, p. 464)

The stance I have adopted is that as the researcher I could not make myself somehow invisible and value-free, and would not wish to pretend that I was somehow capable of doing so. Instead, I have sought to understand and explore the effect that my presence has had on the research and the respondents, and to be open and reflexive on this issue. I seek to understand how my own philosophical and epistemological positions have affected the research, and the effects of my prior knowledge and ways of sense-making, and to provide a full account and analysis of these issues as part of the way I report the research. This will include an interpretation of the implications for my findings and conclusions.

My decision to explicitly adopt this stance was a defining moment in my PhD process, and indeed in my development as a researcher and as a practitioner. It represented a crystallisation of the somewhat vague and ill-defined feelings that had influenced my direction of travel at the beginning of my PhD journey. My instinct about the kind of

research that would achieve my aims was now informed by the learning I had acquired through supporting studies, literature review and consultation with my supervisors and other colleagues, and the synthesis of these various ingredients had brought me to a place from which I could confidently articulate my world view, my epistemological stance and my chosen research strategy. I felt that I had “found my voice” as a researcher. And it was apparent to me that this voice needed to be woven through the research clearly and unashamedly, not somehow hidden “behind the scenes” in an attempt at some kind of anesthetic objectivity. Hence my decision to write this thesis in the first-person, as an autobiographical account of the inseparable journeys of the researcher and his (my) research. Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p. 636) discuss the importance and challenges of personal narrative, which, they explain, started with David Hayano’s (1979) introduction of the term “autoethnography”:

Many now argue that we can only study our own experiences. The researcher becomes the research subject... [T]he commitment to this style of writing does not come easily. It involves learning how to write differently, including how to use personal experience and the first-person voice as vehicles for authorizing claims to truth and knowledge.

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 636)

I would echo the thought that writing in the first-person does not come easily to one who has been trained to write in quite different, more “formal” and “impersonal” styles. However, in my view, my decision to write in this way was a sound decision, which has been quite liberating, is consistent with the epistemological and methodological framework within which I am working, and has enhanced my ability to achieve the aim of my research by clarifying my stance as a reflexive researcher engaged with and within the research process, rather than attempting to be neutral and detached from it.

Research methods: data collection

Having clarified my epistemological stance (social constructionism) and broad research strategy (a single case study, researched through primarily qualitative methods), the next consideration was to add more detail to the design of those methods themselves.

Symon and Cassell (1998, p. 3) explore the extent to which particular research techniques (such as interviewing, observation, surveys) can be used within a number of different paradigms (ontologies/epistemologies). They cite Kildruff and Mehra (1997): “No method grants privileged access to the truth ... and all research approaches are embodied in cultural practice that postmodernists seek to make explicit.”

So, if no method grants privileged access to the truth, and if paradigmatic considerations do not dictate allegiance to any specific methods, which methods would be best suited to the achievement of my research aims?

Yin (2003, p. 85) identifies six sources of evidence which “are most commonly used in doing case studies”:

- ❑ Documentation
- ❑ Archival records
- ❑ Interviews
- ❑ Direct observations
- ❑ Participant-observation
- ❑ Physical artefacts

He notes that this list is not exhaustive, and that these various sources are highly complementary, suggesting that “a good case study will want to use as many sources as possible”.

Yin elaborates upon each of these six sources. For example, he explains that, in a case study context:

...interviews will appear to be guided conversations rather than structured queries. In other words, although you will be pursuing a consistent line of inquiry, your actual stream of questions... is likely to be fluid rather than rigid (Rubin & Rubin, 1995)... throughout the interview process, you have two jobs: (a) to follow your own line of enquiry, as reflected by your case study protocol, and (b) to ask your actual (conversational) questions in an unbiased manner that also serves the needs of your line of inquiry. (Yin, 2003, pp. 89-90)

Yin cites Becker (1998, pp. 58-60), who suggests that, in pursuing a line of inquiry, posing a “why” question (e.g. why did a particular process occur as it did?) can create defensiveness, whereas posing a “how” question should not. “Thus, case study interviews require you to operate on two levels at the same time: satisfying the needs of your line of inquiry while simultaneously putting forth ‘friendly’ and ‘nonthreatening’ questions in your open-ended interviews.” (Yin, 2003, p. 90). Respondents may offer their own insights which may be used as the basis for further inquiry, and may indeed suggest other persons who could be interviewed, and other sources of evidence.

Marshall and Rossman (1999, p. 108) confirm that qualitative researchers rely quite heavily on in-depth interviewing, describing interviewing as “a conversation with a purpose” (after Kahn & Cannell, 1957):

Typically, qualitative in-depth interviews are much more like conversations than formal events with predetermined response categories. The researcher explores a few general topics to help uncover the participant’s views but otherwise respects how the participant frames and structures the responses. This, in fact, is an assumption fundamental to qualitative research: The participant’s perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it... The most important aspect of the interviewer’s approach concerns conveying the attitude that the participant’s views are valuable and useful.

Interviewing, however, has its limitations and weaknesses. Marshall and Rossman (1999, p. 110) point out that:

- ❑ Interviewees may be unwilling; or they may be uncomfortable about sharing everything that is on the interviewer's agenda;
- ❑ They may not be aware of recurring patterns in their lives;
- ❑ The interviewer's questions may not evoke the desired long narratives from participants, because of lack of skill or unfamiliarity with local language;
- ❑ The interviewer may not properly comprehend responses or some elements of the conversation;
- ❑ There may be times when interviewees have good reason not to be truthful.

Clearly, these limitations have to be borne in mind. As Marshall and Rossman (1999, p. 108) point out: "Combined with observation, interviews allow the researcher to understand the meanings that people hold for their everyday activities." They confirm that:

Case studies rely on historical and document analysis, interviewing, and typically, some forms of observation as data collection. A rich tradition ... documents the illustrative power when research focuses in depth and in detail on specific instances of the phenomenon of interest. Case studies take the reader into the setting with a vividness and detail not typically present in more analytic reporting formats (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 159).

As I designed the detail of my research strategy, it was clear to me that interviewing individuals who had been or were currently involved in diagnostic benchmarking in the case study organisation would be a major source of the data I was seeking. They may be involved as the instigators of benchmarking activity, participants in that activity, and/or as interested parties who affected or were affected by that activity. Access to relevant documentation would also contribute; and direct observation of benchmarking activity would be desirable. I considered the possibility of participant observation - for instance, playing the role of a facilitator of benchmarking activity while simultaneously observing it - but decided against this option. I was not convinced that I would be capable of playing such a dual role effectively; and I wanted the research participants to see me as independent of the benchmarking process itself, not as a proponent and "deliverer" of that process.

Research methods: data analysis

As I designed my research strategy, a parallel consideration to the gathering of the primary data was how that data would be used, analysed and interpreted.

Data analysis is a crucial and potentially difficult stage in any qualitative research project. Symon and Cassell (1998, p. 5) point out that "... despite the increased popularity and use of qualitative methods there is relatively less information available about how to conduct qualitative data analysis", but they highlight some notable exceptions (Dey, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Silverman, 1993; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), and several contributors to their own book provide further help to plug this perceived gap (Silvester, 1998; King, 1998; Samra-Fredericks, 1998; Clegg & Walsh, 1998; Johnson, 1998).

Marshall and Rossman (1999, p. 150) describe data analysis as:

...the process of bringing order, structure, and interpretation to the mass of collected data. It is a messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative and fascinating process. It does not proceed in a linear fashion; it is not neat.

They present a continuum of ideal-type analysis strategies (Figure 4.3), adapted from Crabtree and Miller (1992, pp. 17-20), who note, however, that "nearly as many analysis strategies exist as qualitative researchers."

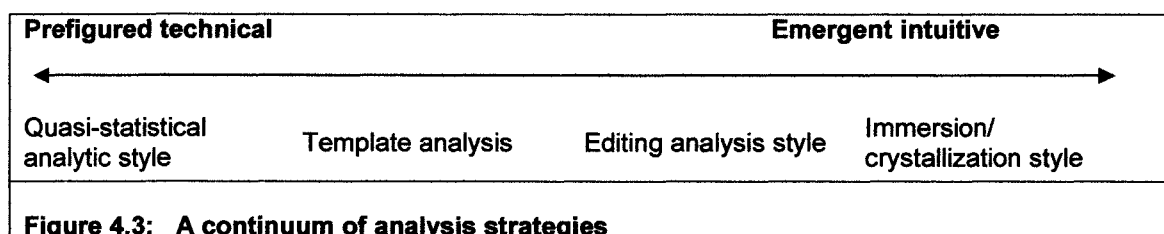


Figure 4.3: A continuum of analysis strategies

Source: Marshall and Rossman (1999, p. 151)

At the “technical” end of the continuum are technical, scientific and standardised strategies: “...the researcher has assumed an objectivist stance relative to the inquiry and has stipulated categories in advance.” At the other end are immersion strategies: “...which do not prefigure categories and which rely heavily on the researcher’s intuitive and interpretive capacities.” Between these extremes lie the “template” and “editing” strategies:

Template strategies rely on sets of codes to apply to the data; these may undergo revision as the analysis proceeds. Editing strategies are less prefigured: “The interpreter engages the text naively, without a template” (Crabtree & Miller, 1992, p. 20) searching for segments of text to generate and illustrate categories of meaning.

(Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 151)

King (1998, pp. 118-119) elaborates about template analysis:

Template analysis is a very widely used approach... often referred to by other terms such as ‘codebook analysis’ or ‘thematic coding’... The essence of the approach is that the researcher produces a list of codes (a ‘template’) representing themes identified in their textual data. Some of these will usually be defined *a priori*, but they will be modified and added to as the researcher reads and interprets the texts... The template approach can thus be seen as occupying a position between content analysis (Weber, 1985), where codes are all predetermined and their distribution is analysed statistically, and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), where there is no *a priori* definition of codes....

Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002) sum up the challenge of data analysis:

The big problem with qualitative data is how to condense highly complex and context-bound information into a format which tells a story in a way that is fully convincing to the reader. In the case of management research, this goes beyond the requirements of good journalism where sources are well-referenced and interpretations are ‘balanced’. It requires both a clear explanation of how the analysis was done and conclusions reached, and a demonstration of how the raw data was transformed into meaningful conclusions... at least a sample [of the data] needs to be illustrated so that the reader can follow the same path, and draw their own conclusions if they wish.

(Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2002, p. 117)

They point out that:

If the researcher is undertaking his or her research from a social constructionist perspective, then they will attempt as far as possible not to draw a distinction between the collection of data and its analysis and interpretation ... [whereas] ... Researchers who prefer a more positivist approach will see a sharper distinction between data and the process of analysis, to the extent that the data collection and analysis may well be performed by different people. They will also be more concerned to examine frequencies within qualitative data which will enable them to turn it into numeric form. After all, numbers are both seductive and persuasive, and for many managers, or funders, the political need for numbers wins through against attempts to provide rich descriptions. (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2002, p. 117)

Johnson (1998) explains that:

The term “induction” refers to the processes by which observers reflect upon their experience of social phenomena and then attempt to formulate explanations that may be used to form an abstract rule, or guiding principle, which can be extrapolated to explain and predict new or similar experiences. Hence AI [Analytic Induction] is a set of methodological procedures which attempt to systematically generate theory grounded in observation of the empirical world... (Johnson, 1998, p. 28)

Johnson tells us that those seeking to justify the use of induction in the social sciences usually argue that explanations of social phenomena which are derived inductively from empirical research are likely to be a better fit with the data (than those derived through the “speculative and *a priori* nature of deductively tested theory”), because of the close linkage between theory building and data collection, which render such explanations more plausible and accessible.

Marshall and Rossman (1999, pp. 152-153) identify six phases of typical analytic procedures:

1. Organizing the data
2. Generating categories, themes and patterns
3. Coding the data
4. Testing the emergent understandings
5. Searching for alternative explanations
6. Writing the report.

They explain that:

Each phase of data analysis entails data reduction as the reams of collected data are brought into manageable chunks and interpretation as the researcher brings meaning and insight to the words and acts of the participants in the study... The interpretive act remains mysterious in both qualitative and quantitative data analysis. It is a process of bringing meaning to raw, inexpressive data that is necessary whether the researcher's language is standard deviations and means or rich description of ordinary events. Raw data have no inherent meaning; the interpretive act brings meaning to those data and displays that meaning to the reader through the written report.

My research strategy needed to incorporate plans for the analysis of the data that I would be collecting. An "editing" or possibly "template" style of analysis would be the best fit with the type of data I would be collecting, and with my belief that the themes and findings should be allowed to emerge from the data rather than being "imposed" by the prior identification of expected themes.

My primary research design: initial planning and pilot study

The bulk of this chapter has been a review of theory relating to research methodology and methods, incorporating some high-level argument concerning the applicability of that theory to my own world view and experiences, and to the aims of my PhD research. The remainder of the chapter will present the case for my chosen research strategy, and catalogue the way in which I have developed, refined and deployed it.

As I have described, from the early stages of my PhD research I planned to adopt an inductive and primarily qualitative approach to the research, studying in some depth the engagement of a small number of organisations with “excellence” and “diagnostic benchmarking.” As I have progressed with the work, I have developed the details of this approach in the light of further thought and advice, early experiences with piloting the approach and, especially, the extensive reading and learning that I have done on the subject of research methodology and methods. However, the central thrust and philosophical positioning of the approach has remained constant throughout.

In the early stages, I completed (as “supporting studies”) three postgraduate taught modules on “Qualitative methods”, “Quantitative methods” and “Research philosophies and issues.” These introduced me to some methodological theory which was new to me at that stage, but as much as anything this enabled me to begin to “know what I didn’t know”. I realised that I needed to do a lot of work to further develop my understanding of this body of knowledge, and my ability to formulate and make the case for a detailed research strategy. I therefore embarked on an extensive review of the methodology and methods literature (the fruits of which were presented earlier in this chapter), in parallel with beginning to negotiate access to some suitable organisations, and to experiment with some primary research methods by completing a pilot study.

My aim in embarking on a pilot study was to do some initial development, testing and refinement of primary research methods. I was able to negotiate access, during 2001, to a Further Education College (which I will call “Organisation A”) which had used the PROBE tool for the first time in March 2000, and had decided to use it again in May 2001. In

preparation for the pilot study, I communicated with the “champion” of benchmarking within the organisation (the Quality Manager), explaining my purposes, aims, requirements and planned methods. I prepared pro-formas for semi-structured interviews with the Quality Manager him/herself and with other research participants, and arranged to make a two-day visit to the organisation (which is located in England but a considerable distance from my home/work base).

The Quality Manager explained that (s)he perceived PROBE to have been a success when the organisation first used it in March 2000. The PROBE feedback report had been shared with the Senior Management Team (SMT) as part of their “away-day” session in April 2000. This had generated some useful discussion, and the SMT had expressed the view that the organisation should use PROBE again one year later, in the words of the Quality Manager “to inform self-assessment and continuous improvement... particularly through benchmarking with other organisations.”

One query that had arisen during the SMT’s discussion of the 2000 PROBE results was about the sensitivity of the results to the membership of the PROBE team. The Quality Manager had been asked by a member of the SMT whether the results were “reliable”, reflecting a perception that the process needed to be sufficiently robust that the same or similar findings and conclusions would emerge if the membership of the PROBE team was changed. This query had fascinated the Quality Manager, so in May 2001 (s)he had arranged for 2 separate PROBE teams to complete the benchmarking process on two consecutive days, and wished to conduct an “experiment” to see how similar or different the outputs would be.

I was able to interview the Quality Manager on one day, and then to observe “Team 1” completing the PROBE process on the second day. Other commitments made it impossible for me to observe Team 2’s PROBE day, but the same facilitator worked with Teams 1 and 2 and I was able subsequently to obtain a de-briefing about the second team’s experiences via the facilitator as well as via written records of their scores and feedback, and the facilitator’s report back to the organisation.

A number of important learning points arose from this pilot study:

1. The importance of formalisation of primary research protocols and advance warning to research participants regarding:
 - ❑ the nature of the research
 - ❑ what the data will be used for
 - ❑ anticipated outcomes of the research, and
 - ❑ what is being asked of them in terms of commitment of time and the nature of the data they will be asked to provide

This learning point arose because, despite having expended some considerable effort in advance to provide oral (over the telephone) and written (via e-mail) briefings to the “champion” of benchmarking within the organisation, I still discovered in the process of interviewing that person that (s)he was not really clear about the purposes of the research or the nature of data I wanted and methods I intended to deploy in order to gather it. I was relying on this individual to relay clear messages to his/her colleagues whom I wished to involve as participants. It was evident once I began to interview him/her and to meet his/her colleagues that this had been an unrealistic expectation. Hence I learned that I needed to be more formal and very clear about my communication with the organisation, and its “champion” and/or sponsors of the research; and that I would need to pay careful attention to, and preferably have some involvement in, the way that the request to participate in the research was initially disseminated within the case study organisation to the relevant people.

2. The time commitment needed from myself and the participants also became clearer as a result of completing the pilot study. The brief pilot study involved me in two extremely long days, back-to-back, to travel to the organisation, be shown around, conduct an interview with the champion, and then the following day observe Team 1’s PROBE session before travelling home for the following day’s work commitments. Given that I planned to interview some or all of the PROBE team members themselves in my case study organisation, and ideally to interview them both before and after the

benchmarking day itself as well as observing that day, the implication was that I would have to dedicate substantial amounts of time over a lengthy period to following the benchmarking process through from start to finish and capturing the perceptions of the key participants along the way. During the pilot study, it became clearer to me just how time-consuming this process would be - particularly when the organisation in question was located several hours travel away from my home/work base.

3. The difficulty for my interview respondent of focusing on the issues I wished him/her to tell me about, and avoiding straying off into lengthy tangential descriptions and explanations. I concluded that it would have been helpful for the champion to have seen my outline of issues for the interview in advance, and that if (s)he had done so (s)he might have been able to prepare better and to stick to the point rather more easily.
4. The difficulty of recording the wealth of information offered by my interviewee while also maintaining engagement in the discussion with him/her. I attempted to record the key points arising from the interview by keeping written notes. This proved very difficult, and resulted in a set of notes that were an inadequate record of the interview, and taught me the lesson that audio-recording my interviews was going to be vital.
5. Confirmation that the combination of semi-structured interviews with appropriate staff and direct observation of the benchmarking process was going to deliver a wealth of qualitative data and a richness of understanding of the benchmarking process and its meaning and impact within a case study organisation. I emerged from this brief pilot study totally convinced that the inductive, qualitative approach I had planned was going to be effective and would enable me to make a substantial and original contribution to knowledge.
6. The pilot study also confirmed the learning point that, at that point in time, my knowledge of qualitative methodologies and methods needed further strengthening before I would be ready to begin the collection of primary data "in earnest". As a result, I resolved to make the further study of methodology and methods a major component of the following months of my PhD studies.

7. A further learning point was that for the Quality Manager and members of the SMT the issue of the “reliability” of PROBE seemed to have taken on nearly as much importance as the findings that the benchmarking process would deliver or the learning and improvement that it might generate.

In addition to the above learning points, the pilot study also gave me some early indications of the nature of the role of diagnostic benchmarking, and the drivers of the way that this role was evolving in this particular organisation. From my interview with the Quality Manager, and from my first-hand observation of Team 1's PROBE discussions, it was evident that, in the context of this organisation, the commitment and enthusiasm of the Quality Manager were quite inspirational to his/her colleagues. (S)he had developed a personal commitment to, and belief in, the effectiveness of the PROBE tool and its potential benefits for the organisation. It seemed that a number of his/her colleagues had been prepared to devote their time to the 2001 benchmarks at least partly because of his/her force of personality and persuasive powers, which were themselves fuelled by a personal enthusiasm for the exercise. Within the scope of the pilot study, I was unable to interview the individual PROBE team members, but it was clear that an opportunity to do so (as I intended to in the case study organisation(s) itself) would enable me to test the extent and nature of their engagement in the benchmarking process, and the extent to which the fact and nature of their participation was influenced by the characteristics and behaviours of the “champion.”

The interview with the Quality Manager revealed that (s)he was unwilling or unable to provide clear, detailed answers to the following questions:

- ❑ What benefits do you perceive that you and/or the organisation obtained through your previous involvement in [the PROBE project in your sector] in 2000?
- ❑ To what extent are these benefits measurable?
- ❑ What do you perceive to have been the costs? Disbenefits? Shortcomings? Risks?
- ❑ What benefits do you anticipate that you and/or the organisation will obtain through your 2001 involvement in [the PROBE project?]

Despite the Quality Manager's apparent enthusiasm for PROBE, and assertions that (s)he and the SMT were impressed with the benefits in 2000, when I pressed for more detail (s)he could not be specific about what those benefits were, nor what was the opposite side of the coin (perceived costs, risks etc). This was an intriguing finding, and suggested to me another line of enquiry - the extent to which the key stakeholders and instigators of benchmarking within the organisation were willing and able to specify the expected/actual benefits of benchmarking. My prior assumption that this was something that the champion would be willing and able to do had not stood up to the test of my pilot study.

My observation of Team 1's PROBE meeting, and the information I subsequently received about Team 2's session, revealed that both teams perceived a number of organisational strengths that might be important in determining the extent to which diagnostic benchmarking will deliver benefits. For example, both teams expressed the view that the organisation had well-established "continuous improvement" processes in place, that they considered that they worked for a "learning organisation", but that there has been limited training in "quality tools and techniques".

The pilot study, then, yielded some valuable lessons which subsequently helped me to shape and refine my primary research strategy and methods; and also provided some early indications of several factors that could be important aspects of the role of diagnostic benchmarking as an enabler of organisational improvement:

- The presence of a "champion" of benchmarking within the organisation, with the vision and drive to mobilise and enthuse colleagues
- The existence within the organisation of a culture of learning, and/or an on-going improvement process of some kind, and the integration of diagnostic benchmarking with that process.
- The mindset adopted by key personnel in relation to costs and benefits, and how this is applied to consideration of the potential and actual benefits and costs of the diagnostic benchmarking process.

At the time when I initiated and completed the pilot study in Organisation A, I had not yet completed the detailed design of my research strategy, and was anticipating that the strategy would include several case studies. It was my intention that, having completed the pilot study and proceeded to develop the comprehensive research strategy, I would return to Organisation A and gather further data, including this organisation as one of the case studies in my research. In practice, this didn't happen, due to a combination of factors:

- ❑ More time elapsed than I intended between completion of the pilot project and my readiness to begin primary data collection “in earnest”.
- ❑ I lost touch with the “champion” at Organisation A, who left the Organisation.
- ❑ Organisation A is a long way from my home/work base, and I subsequently managed to arrange access to a case study organisation which was more conveniently located.
- ❑ As I proceeded to finalise my research strategy and plans, I decided to focus on a single case study organisation, rather than several, as I will explain below.

My primary research design: development and deployment

The processes of planning, completing and reflecting upon the pilot study confirmed that I needed to undertake a thorough review of the research methodology and methods literature, so I proceeded to do so - the outputs of this review were presented earlier in this chapter. Having reviewed the literature, consulted with colleagues and advisors and considered the alternative approaches available to me, I decided that my chosen research design was to focus on a single case study organisation (preferably encompassing multiple units of analysis). This decision reflected my belief that my research aim would be most effectively achieved by pursuing substantial depth and richness in terms of the primary data I would gather, and the methods through which I would gather it, and being prepared to sacrifice “breadth” of coverage in order to facilitate the achievement of this “depth”. It also reflected the learning that I had gained through completing the pilot study, including the demonstration that it had provided of the depth and richness of data that would be available if I were to apply my data collection strategy comprehensively in an organisation that was willing to offer me extensive access to the appropriate people and events; and, equally, the lesson I had learned about the time that I was going to have to dedicate to following that strategy through to its full extent. I had every intention of dedicating a great deal of time and effort, but had to be realistic about what was achievable.

I arrived at this decision, and began to formulate the detail of my primary research design, during the autumn of 2003. It was apparent at this stage that Organisation A (where I had completed the pilot study) was not going to provide me with a suitable opportunity to complete my primary research, so I turned my attention to negotiating access to another suitable organisation. I defined a set of criteria for selecting a “suitable” organisation, listed in Table 4.5.

TABLE 4.5: Criteria for selecting a suitable case study organisation

Essential criteria

1. The organisation must be committed to deploying diagnostic benchmarking in the near future, so that I will be able to observe this process and gather data before, during and after it
2. The organisation must be willing to provide me with the access I need to contextual data about the organisation and its on-going development and, crucially, to the multiple stakeholders in the benchmarking process whom I wish to involve as research participants
3. Those individual stakeholders (or at least the majority of them) must be willing to participate in the research

Desirable criteria

It is desirable that the organisation:

4. has a track record of deploying diagnostic benchmarking as well as being committed to doing so again in the (near) future
 5. is planning multiple deployments of diagnostic benchmarking during the coming months
 6. is reasonably accessible to me from my home/work base, given that I will need to visit their site on multiple occasions
-

Clearly, and deliberately, in defining these criteria I was not attempting to select a case or cases which would be in some way “representative” of a broader population. In Yin’s (2003, pp. 39-40) terms, an organisation that met all of my criteria would represent “an extreme case”, a legitimate rationale for focus upon a single case. As Stake (2000) argues:

Generalization should not be emphasized in all research (p. 439)... Even for collective case studies, selection by sampling of attributes should not be the highest priority. Balance and variety are important; opportunity to learn is of primary importance. (Stake, 2000, p. 446).

At that stage, in the autumn of 2003, as I sought to negotiate access to a suitable organisation, I agreed with my supervision team that the alternative of conducting primary research within more than one organisation would remain open as a contingency plan, should the research strategy require modification in the light of events. The primary research would be completed within a single case study organisation provided that sufficient quantity and richness of data was obtainable. This would be what Yin (2003) calls the “single-case (embedded) design”, whereby the research focuses upon a number of “units of analysis” within a single case study setting. In my research, the “multiple units” would be multiple deployments of diagnostic benchmarking within a single organisation, between them involving multiple services/departments/business units.

My continuing involvement, in my professional role, in the PROBE benchmarking scheme and associated projects provided me with access to information about organisations that had deployed, were deploying and were planning to deploy these benchmarking tools. I identified one particular private sector company that had used PROBE and related tools on 4 occasions in 4 years and had recently won a regional “business excellence” award, and whose most recent PROBE scores were among the highest ever recorded. I approached them to explore the possibility of involving them in my PhD research. It appeared that they might meet all of the essential criteria I had defined, and some of the desirable criteria. My approach was warmly received by the company’s Business Excellence Manager, who told me (in an e-mail dated 1st September 2003) “...yes, [Company B] would be interested in taking part... I would be happy to discuss the project [in more detail]... and the

commitment you require from ourselves...” This began a dialogue which continued for several months, and led to plans being drawn up for me to interview seventeen company directors, managers and staff who had been directly involved in the two most recent PROBE benchmarks. However, shortly before I was due to begin the data gathering in earnest, the Business Excellence Manager informed me that “internal changed priorities” meant that they could no longer allow me the access that had been arranged in the near future, and could give no guarantees about when they might be able to do so. This news, and the way it was delivered, cast real doubt on Organisation B’s willingness to provide the access that I needed. After some reflection, I decided to abandon my efforts to negotiate access to this company, and to look elsewhere.

Primary research in Organisation C

The next approach that I made was more successful, and in the long term provided me with unfettered access to a very suitable case study organisation for more than two years, and with a wealth of primary data. “Organisation C” is in the public sector, a “council” (a “local authority”), and when I approached them in late 2003 they had been using the Excellence Model in various ways for several years and had used PROBE diagnostic benchmarking tools six times. A colleague made me aware of their plans to use PROBE again, so I approached the Organisational Development Manager to explore the possibility of conducting primary research in the organisation. My approach was received positively, and we quickly entered into discussions about the aims of my research, the access I would need, the implications for the organisation and the research protocols that would apply.

Organisation C would represent an “extreme” case study because of their extensive use of diagnostic benchmarking. The latest available statistics on the use of PROBE tools (Table 4.6) confirm this. As at July 2004, the number of organisational “sites” which had completed “PROBE” benchmarks was 5,072. Only 165 (3.3%) of these sites had benchmarked themselves two or more times; Organisation C was in this minority, having deployed PROBE tools three times to benchmark the entire organisation - their other three uses of PROBE tools had been applied to individual departments or services (which in terms of the PROBE Partnership’s statistics would be designated as individual “sites”).

TABLE 4.6: Deployment of “PROBE” benchmarking tools (analysis of single versus “serial” deployments by individual organisations/sites)

Number of sites that have benchmarked themselves once	4907	97%
Number of sites that have benchmarked themselves twice	111	2%
Number of sites that have benchmarked themselves three times	32	1%
Number of sites that have benchmarked themselves four times	15	0%
Number of sites that have benchmarked themselves five times	7	0%

Total number of benchmarked sites	5072
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Total number of PROBE benchmarks	5320
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Source: PROBE Partnership (unpublished data), July 2004

From the initial discussions, with the Organisational Development Manager and another senior colleague, it was clear that Organisation C was likely to satisfy all of the essential criteria that I had specified:

1. The organisation had plans in place to deploy diagnostic benchmarking for a seventh time in the near future, and the representatives with whom I was discussing the research confirmed that I would be able to observe this process and gather data “before, during and after”...
2. ... and that they and their colleagues would be willing to provide me with the access I need to contextual data about the organisation and its on-going development and, crucially, to the multiple stakeholders in the benchmarking process whom I wished to involve as research participants
3. ... and that they anticipated that those individual stakeholders (or at least the majority of them) would be willing to participate in the research

Furthermore, Organisation C also satisfied all of my desirable criteria:

4. The organisation had a track record of deploying diagnostic benchmarking and was committed to doing so again in the (near) future
5. ... and was planning multiple deployments of diagnostic benchmarking during the coming months - they were planning to deploy PROBE “several times during 2004”
6. ... and was readily accessible to me from my home/work base, which would enable me to visit the organisation on multiple occasions while keeping the expenditure of time and expense within reason.

Organisation C formally agreed to be a case study during Autumn 2003, an arrangement that was discussed between myself, the Organisational Development Manager and one of the senior councillors (both subsequently became research participants), defined as a set of terms of reference through an exchange of letters, formally approved by the then Chief

Executive and an Executive Member of the Council. Subsequently, I worked closely with the organisation for over two years (late 2003 until early 2006), during which I was able to conduct 23 extended interviews with 14 employees and stakeholders and analyse some significant events in the eventful story of Organisation C's "journey to excellence."

The arrangement I made with Organisation C was that throughout my research I would make every possible effort to preserve the anonymity of the organisation and of all individuals involved. This was important and appropriate so that the individuals who have participated have known that they could provide me with data freely and honestly, knowing that nothing they told me would be revealed to anybody in a way that would identify its source; and that nothing they told me about their organisation, its activities and performance, their colleagues and related matters, would be communicated to the outside world in any way that might be damaging to their interests. I will refer to the Council as "Organisation C", and to individuals by code names; and use other measures to protect anonymity, such as disguising job titles, department names, geographical and sectoral references, and the like. In all cases, I will do this in ways that minimise any corruption or obscuration of any meanings or facts, as far as this is possible.

In practice, I have found the challenge of preserving the participants' anonymity more difficult than I anticipated. Perhaps naively, I did not foresee how difficult it would be to disguise the words of individuals such that their identity would be hidden not only from "the world at large", but also from each other and other colleagues within Organisation C. Colleagues, of course, already know the identity of the organisation; and they are well placed to be able to "recognise" their colleagues through their words, because of links they can make to job roles, shared experiences, even a "turn of phrase." Having identified this issue during data analysis, I enlisted the help of one participant who has worked with me as a coordinator of the primary research activity, to help me to remove (or at least minimise) any "identity clues" within the words I am quoting from interview transcripts. This person is the only research participant who is privy to the list of people whom I have interviewed, and has committed to keep this information confidential. (S)he and I are satisfied that we have minimised the risk of participants being identifiable by each other.

Data collection in practice: an emergent process

In conducting the primary research, and presenting my data and findings, I have made every effort to ensure that readers of this thesis have first-hand access to the voices of people who have lived and breathed the story of Organisation C and its journey to excellence, namely the staff and other stakeholders who have been closest to the action. In this sense, the most important primary data has been generated through the 23 interviews that I have conducted with 14 individuals. In presenting my data and findings in the chapters that follow this one, I have tried to strike the right balance between several aspects which I see as key within the research process: reflexivity, analysis, interpretation and synthesis. This has been a considerable challenge for me in deciding how to structure the following chapters, because my experience of conducting and analysing the interviews brought home to me the richness of the participants' own stories, when heard or read in their original and complete form; I want to "let them have their voices" in the way I present the data, and yet I must balance this desire against the need to "do my job as the researcher" by analysing, interpreting, theming and synthesising; not "just reporting" the participants' words. This is a challenge that every researcher must face - I hope that I have managed to get this balance right.

These interviews themselves have been substantial, lasting for a minimum of an hour, and in most cases more than this, up to a maximum of approximately 3 hours. In each case, I have provided the participant in advance with a written brief (an example is shown in Table 4.7) explaining the background and context of my research, broadly the subject matter that I wished them to cover during the interview, and the way in which the interview would be conducted and the data used. Without exception, the participants seemed to find this approach acceptable and helpful, and they all signed a copy of the briefing document, thus confirming their consent for me to use the data.

TABLE 4.7: Example of written brief/consent form for research participants

Dear _____, Thank you for agreeing to let me interview you as part of my PhD research, which I am doing through Northumbria University. The research is about **Organisational Excellence**, and I'm keen to hear your views about the Council's progress towards becoming, and remaining, an 'excellent' organisation, including aspects such as:

- your perceptions about the Council's achievements to date, and its current status
- how the organisation has changed over the years
- key drivers/enablers of change and improvement; and significant barriers/challenges
- the way ahead

I have a specific interest in '**The effectiveness of diagnostic benchmarking as an enabler of organisational improvement**'. The 'PROBE' tool is one example of what I describe as 'diagnostic benchmarking', and the EFQM Excellence Model is another. I know that the Council has made use of both of these tools, so as part of my research I am hoping to get some fresh insights into:

- the Council's experiences of using 'diagnostic benchmarking' tools
- the benefits that are obtained by organisations that use these tools
- how these benefits compare with their expectations and the potential benefits
- ultimately what lessons can be learned which might help to ensure that more organisations get more benefits from using such tools.

I would appreciate your help to arrange for the interview to happen somewhere where we will have privacy and be undisturbed for an hour or so. With your permission, I will tape record our discussion so that we can have a complete record of it without me having to slow you down by taking copious notes. Everything you say will remain confidential - I am interviewing a number of your colleagues, and when I analyse what has been said I will write it up in such a way that readers will be unable to identify 'who said what'. The organisation will also be anonymous in any published work (unless you and your colleagues decide that you are happy for it to be named, having 'vetted' what I have written).

The University's Research Ethics Policy requires me to explain to you in advance that:

- ❖ *you have the right to stop our discussion at any time if you are unhappy with it, to refuse to answer any question, or to change your mind about something you've said*
- ❖ *afterwards, I will give you a written record of our discussion and ask you to read it, correct it if necessary, delete things you're not happy with, add things that you'd like to add, etc.*
- ❖ *if you bring something to my attention that I feel I need to reveal for legal or ethical reasons (for example, if I suspect that something illegal has occurred, or somebody is in some danger) then I will reveal it to either {named individual} or {named individual}, who have agreed to play this role in support of my research. Anything of this sort would, of course, be dealt with in a sensitive and appropriate manner. If in doubt, please ask me before you tell me!*

If you are happy with these arrangements, please let me have a signed copy of this sheet when we meet (this is also a University requirement). **Thank you again for your help.**

Signature _____ Name _____ Date _____

The interviews themselves were “semi-structured”. They invariably began with a brief discussion of the background given in the briefing paper and confirmation “on the record” of the participant’s informed consent, after which I simply invited the participant to talk around the subject in their own way. With some participants, I was able to simply listen for long periods and make only minimal interventions, for example to confirm that they were covering the sort of ground that I wanted them to cover, or to ask them to expand upon or clarify a point. With others, I felt the need to intervene rather more, for example to encourage them to speak, or to “bring them back” to the matter in hand if they were straying into other areas with little or no relevance to my research. Marshall and Rossman’s (1999, p. 108) description of interviews as “a conversation with a purpose” fits well with the nature of the interviews that I conducted.

I recorded each interview using a digital recorder (a tape recorder for the first few interviews). After each interview, I had these recordings transcribed (I paid a specialist company to complete the transcription process for me - having first required them to sign up to a confidentiality agreement) and then did some “tidying up” (to remove meaningless and unhelpful wording such as “er, um, you know....”; repetition such as “We first started (pause).... first started to (pause)... to use the EFQM Model....”; and to correct some mistakes and omissions in the transcripts caused by the transcriber’s unfamiliarity with technical language/jargon or with the participants’ regional accents). I then passed a copy of the “tidied transcript” to the participant and invited them to review it via a covering note that said:

Please find enclosed/attached a copy of the interview transcript. As we discussed, I hope that you can find time to review it for me and let me have any comments. If you wish to change/add to/elaborate upon anything, please do so. It is not my desire to end up with a perfect record of what you said on that particular day, I am more concerned to have a reflection of your views that is as accurate as possible.

Some participants replied that they were happy with the transcript as it was, perhaps pointing out a few corrections; others responded with some detailed changes, clarifications, additions and/or replacements for some parts of their transcript. Several participants, having reviewed their transcripts, invited me to visit them again for a follow-up interview, and these follow-ups yielded valuable additional data and insights. Although it was a time-consuming exercise, I am convinced that this “reflexive” component of my research methods (i.e. returning the interview transcripts to the participants for review) added considerably to the depth of understanding, insight and meaning that I have been able to gain from my research within Organisation C.

As part of my commitment to transparency and resonance in the research, to “letting the participants have their voices” in the way I present the data, findings and conclusions, I want to introduce the participants to readers of this thesis, and provide readers with the opportunity to “get to know them”. However, I need to balance this quest for transparency against my commitment to preserving their anonymity and minimising the number of “clues” that might allow any reader to identify the people or to identify “who said what?” For this reason, I have given each participant a fictitious name, and have chosen names which are intended to be gender-neutral, with the help of several websites which provide advice on the subject of gender-neutrality (BNBG, 2005; Sleight, 2005; Wheeler, 1999). As Van Fleet and Atwater (1997) point out, this is not a totally reliable way of ensuring that the reader does not think of the individual participants as either male or female, but it will obscure the true identity (and gender) of the individual participant, and is preferable to the alternative of using code names or letters, which would tend to create a greater obstacle to the reader’s engagement with the text. The chosen names have been assigned randomly to the participants. My use of gender-neutral names is intended to achieve what Crawley and O’Meara call “gender proofing” of the research: “Gender proofing requires... that the knowledge, experiences and values of both women and men be given equal weight...” (Crawley & O’Meara, 2002, p. 3). I have no reason to believe that there would be gender differences in the responses I would receive from male and female research participants, although it is possible that they could exist; but my aim in using gender-neutral fictitious names is to take gender out of the equation in terms of readers’ interpretations of the research participants’ words.

Two of the participants (fictitious names Lee and Joe) were my initial and coordinating contacts with Organisation C, with Lee in particular playing an on-going and pivotal role in facilitating the research process. Lee and Joe, separately and together, entered into lengthy discussions with me about the purpose and conduct of my research, and helped me to operationalise my plans to obtain access to the relevant data and people. They suggested an initial list of people whom I might wish to interview, and effected introductions to some of these people to “open the door” for me. Subsequently, I added other people to this list based on data that I had gathered and suggestions that I invited from other participants, and was introduced to and/or approached them as appropriate. Thus, the list of research participants whom I approached and (in most cases) interviewed was very much a “purposive” sample, which was intended to include as many as possible of the people who would be best-placed to provide me with the full range of insights and perspectives into Organisation C’s journey to excellence and the role of diagnostic benchmarking in that journey.

Robson (2002, pp. 264-265) explains that small-scale studies commonly employ “non-probability samples” which:

...are acceptable when there is no intention or need to make a statistical generalization to any population beyond the sample surveyed... They typically involve the researcher using his judgement to achieve a particular purpose, and for this reason are sometimes referred to as *purposive samples*...

Several people who were approached (by myself or on my behalf), with an invitation to participate in the research, declined to do so. They included the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive of an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) that is responsible for some of the Council’s services. I saw both as potentially valuable contributors to the research, perhaps particularly the ALMO Chief Executive who led one of the Council’s PROBE teams over the last few years. I could only speculate about their reasons for choosing not to participate, and about what additional or different insights and perspectives they might have contributed; and that speculation would serve no purpose.

The timings of the interviews that I conducted are shown in Figure 4.4.

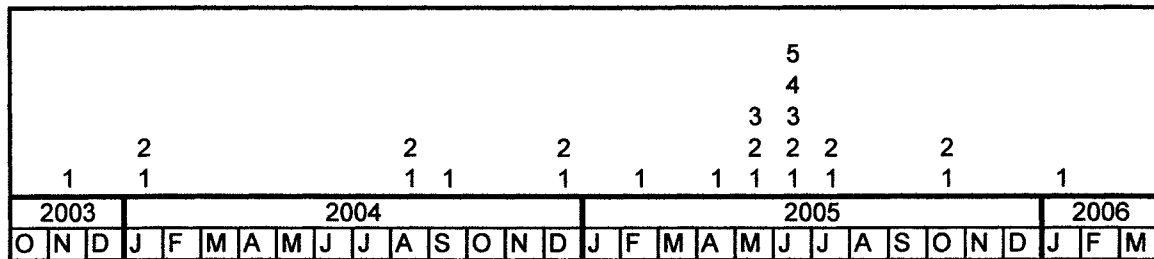


Figure 4.4: Timings of interviews with Organisation C's staff & stakeholders

My initial intention, after discussions with Lee and Joe in late 2003, was to focus initially on a planned PROBE benchmark which would be happening early in 2004 as part of the "Best Value Review" of Organisation C's "Support Services"; and then proceed to focus retrospectively on an earlier PROBE benchmark, completed in 2001, thus enabling the research to examine the perceptions and experiences of all involved before, during and soon after a PROBE benchmark; and the "longer view" of a PROBE completed 3 years previously, which would allow the participants to reflect upon the medium- to long-term impact of the diagnostic benchmarking process. As events unfolded, these plans had to be revised. The individuals within Organisation C who were planning to arrange a PROBE benchmark as part of the review of Support Services (Bren, Lee and Bernie were prominent in this planning process, and in communicating its progress to me) have revised these plans a number of times between late 2003 and time of writing, and that PROBE is yet to actually happen. The uncertainty and revisions in these plans generated uncertainty in my own plans for the primary research, and this, combined with my extended absence from work (and from PhD research) due to ill health in the early months of 2004, meant that the interview schedule got off to a very slow start. Subsequently, from August 2004 onwards, the pace picked up, and from that stage onwards the timing of the interviews was determined by:

- ❑ emerging clarity in my own mind about the people I wished to interview
- ❑ their willingness and availability to participate

- ❑ my own availability (in September 2004 I changed jobs, and my new job involved an intensive period of induction training and a lot of travel, which added an extra difficulty to the process of arranging and completing interviews)
- ❑ continuing instability in Organisation C's plans for the Best Value Review of Support Services, exacerbated by the departure from the organisation in early 2005 of Bren, who until that time was leading the process of arranging the review, including plans to use PROBE as part of it; and a dawning realisation in my mind that this PROBE benchmark might not actually happen within a timescale that would enable me to study it as part of my PhD research
- ❑ the themes that progressively emerged from the primary data itself, which increasingly indicated the merits of focusing on themes such as broader aspects of the Council's journey to excellence, and its achievement of the Audit Commission's "Excellent Council" status, within the interview process

As events unfolded, it proved impossible for me to directly observe a PROBE benchmarking process being completed within Organisation C, for the simple reason that no such processes were arranged or completed between November 2003 (when I began to gather primary data) and January 2006 (when I decided that I must terminate my data collection activities in order to concentrate on data analysis and writing up). This was despite the repeated assurances and (so far as I could judge) sincere intentions of several of the research participants that several PROBEs would have been arranged and completed during that time period.

My initial intention was to include direct observation of a benchmarking process as part of my data collection, and I cannot deny that I have experienced disappointment at not being able to carry this intention through. However, I feel that the absence of this component of the data has been compensated by the richness of the data I have collected through the interviews I have completed with a wide range of Organisation C's people, including several with direct experience of participation in PROBE benchmarking teams. This is one of the ways in which my planned approach has differed from what happened in practice, but I am clear that my ability to achieve my research aim has not been diminished by this unexpected turn of events.

Reflecting upon this sequence of events, it is clear that the process of gathering primary data has been emergent and somewhat “messy”. However, I make no apologies for this - I have been conducting “real world” research in the setting of a real, living, breathing organisation, dealing with all of the uncertainties, complexities and unexpected turns of events that this entails; and undertaking this research from a social constructionist stance, which implies that I would anticipate and welcome the emergent nature of the process. As Robson (2002) reminds us, in his book which is appropriately entitled “Real world research”:

As an experimental psychologist, I started with a virtually unquestioned assumption that rigorous and worthwhile enquiry entailed a laboratory, and the statistical analysis of quantitative data obtained from carefully controlled experiments. More recently I have developed doubts - in part planted by working... alongside social psychologists and sociologists who seemed to go about things in very different ways... Also, my developing interest in more ‘applied’ fields... precipitated a fundamental reconsideration of the style and approach to enquiry which are appropriate if one wants to say something sensible about such complex, messy, poorly controlled ‘field’ settings (pp. xv-xvi)... there is an increasing recognition of the value of some very different approaches to social research... [which] are commonly called *qualitative designs*... [or] *flexible designs*... flexible in the sense that much less pre-specification takes place and the design evolves, develops and... ‘unfolds’ as the research proceeds.

(Robson, 2002, pp. 6-7)

Analysing and interpreting the primary data

Following Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002, p. 17), and given that I have undertaken the research from a social constructionist perspective, I have not attempted to draw a clear line between the collection of data and its analysis. My approach to data analysis has conformed most closely to Crabtree and Miller's (1992, pp. 17-20) "editing analysis style", whereby the interpreter "...engages the text naively, without a template... searching for segments of text to generate and illustrate categories of meaning." (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 151). As the work proceeded, this style evolved into a "template analysis", and I made use of the software tool "QSR N6" for qualitative data analysis (formerly known as "NUD*IST" - Non-Numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing) as an aid to the processes of (1) organising the data; (2) generating categories, themes and patterns; and (3) coding the data. These three phases were followed by the remainder of Marshall and Rossman's (1999, p. 152) six phases of analytic procedures, viz.: (4) testing the emergent understandings; (5) searching for alternative explanations; and (6) "writing up" the research.

In total, the transcripts of the 23 interviews contain 187,000 words, and they represent a very extensive record of the recollections, interpretations, ideas, views and perceptions of the research participants. I estimate that the interviews themselves lasted for a total of approximately 35 hours.

The processes of administering the transcription of the interview recordings, editing (tidying and correcting) the transcripts, inviting the participants to review the transcripts and then responding to their responses, added up to a substantial piece of work that consumed a lot of effort during the period from the Autumn of 2004 until the early months of 2006 - a longer period and more substantial workload than I foresaw. This was followed (with some overlap) by the process of interpreting and analysing the data. In advance of this stage, I gave a lot of thought to the pros and cons of using a software tool to assist with the analysis phase, having completed some training in the use of the QSR N6 tool.

Atherton and Elsmore (2004) present an eloquent and detailed “dialogue and dialectic” examining the pros and cons of using software such as QSR N6 for the analysis of qualitative data. They voice concerns that the use of standardised protocols and software could “further de-contextualise de-contextualised data (placing the data most firmly into the community of the researcher and removing it - permanently - from the community of the researched)” (p. 4); and could exacerbate the “risk” and “leakage” of the research methodology (p. 11). The risks identified are that the context and meaning of the research are not communicated through the process; and that the meaning is misinterpreted or distorted, consciously or not, by the researcher. Research is said to be “leaky” in that “...all research processes lose part of the meaning and significance of the conditions and phenomena they are examining...” They also present arguments in favour of the use of software packages and protocols “...as a complementary and... valid approach to organizing, examining and therefore understanding data.”

As I proceeded, I found that a “hybrid” approach worked best for me, whereby I used the functionality of the QSR N6 software to review and code the contents of all of the transcripts, in order to identify key themes that were emerging from the data; and also, initially following the advice of one of my supervisors, and subsequently learning through experience the power of this approach, by repeatedly listening to the “raw” recordings of the interviews. I found that in this way the voices of the participants, and the themes that they were developing, emerged quite naturally from the detail, confirming and enhancing the understanding that I was deriving through reviewing and coding the data in QSR N6. The software proved to be a useful labour-saving and organisational tool.

My analysis of the data initially identified a number of recurring themes that were apparent in the words and ideas of the research participants, and in the supporting data that I had gathered in the form of policy documentation and reports, performance data, Organisation C’s submissions and inputs to external assessment processes (including Best Value inspections, Comprehensive Performance Assessments, Regional Excellence Awards and PROBE benchmarks), and feedback reports from these various processes. As these themes became apparent to me, through my reading of and listening to the data, I created codes

within the software and thus collated the data that was relevant to each theme. This painstaking process was the vehicle through which I was able to complete an initial thematic analysis of the data and begin to interpret the emerging messages into a set of research findings.

As I proceeded with the analysis and interpretation, I enlisted the help of a small number of the research participants who were willing to review drafts and provide me with their feedback about my analysis and interpretation. This proved to be a valuable contribution to the refinement of the analysis. This iterative process (of writing, reviewing, receiving feedback from other reviewers, and re-drafting) stimulated the progressive emergence of layers of meaning and the discovery of connections that led on to my articulation of a set of research findings, comparison and contextualisation with the existing body of knowledge, and synthesis of my conclusions.

Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have reviewed the issues of research philosophy and methodology, and defined my personal stance which has underpinned my approach to the research. I have proceeded to set out options that I identified and appraised for the research strategy, and explained and justified my chosen strategy and methods - as I designed them, and as I deployed them in practice.

In the following four chapters, I will present:

- ❑ an introduction to Organisation C and to the research participants.
- ❑ a summary of and selected extracts from the primary data.
- ❑ the research findings that have emerged from the data
- ❑ my interpretations of those findings, and of their significance in the context of the existing body of knowledge.

In presenting the primary data, I will quote extensively from interview transcripts. I hope that in this way I can enable readers of this thesis to “hear” the voices of the research participants themselves “loud and clear” as well as, of course, presenting my own interpretation of the meaning of what the participants have collectively told us, and how this fits with other available evidence and with the relevant bodies of knowledge.

The first quote from a transcript, below, is my own explanation of my approach to data collection that I offered to one of the research participants during an interview at an early stage of the research. This research participant was considering the possibility of registering for a PhD, and was therefore especially interested to learn some detail about the methodology and methods I was employing, and asked me to explain more about them. This particular set of words seems to me to be a useful summary of the research philosophy and strategy that have been the focus of this chapter, so I am using this quotation of my own transcribed words to close this chapter, and to provide a stepping stone into the

following chapters in which the story of Organisation C and its deployment of diagnostic benchmarking will unfold:

The way this sort of research works is that the validity of the research, and the quality of the research, is largely dependent upon the transparency of ‘what does all of that raw material look like?’ and the process that takes us from today, you and I having this conversation, to me eventually putting a thesis together that says, ‘here’s what I’ve concluded.’ And, within that whole process, anyone reading my thesis should feel that they understand precisely ‘How was this done? What was said?’ - not just ‘What does Dave Yarrow say about what Person X said?’, but ‘What did Person X say?’ and ‘How has Dave Yarrow interpreted what Person X said?’ and eventually, having listened to a lot of other people talking about the same subject, turned that into something which says something about diagnostic benchmarking.

So I’m not saying for a moment that the whole transcript of this discussion will be in the thesis, because my thesis won’t be as long as the Encyclopaedia Britannica! But bits of it will be there. Your name won’t be there, the name of the organisation won’t be there, but bits of the raw material, the raw discussion, will be there as part of me justifying how I have eventually concluded that this is what has been learned about the topic that I’m looking at. And that’s kind of the flipside of... if I did the other sort of research, the positivistic, questionnaire-driven, large scale type of research that we were discussing a few minutes ago, the questions that would be fired back at me would be, ‘How many people did you write to and send your questionnaire to?’; ‘How many responded?’; ‘How representative is that of the population at large and of organisations in the UK?’; and so on. In this kind of research, that set of questions is irrelevant. So I won’t make any claims when I get to the end of this that what is true of this subject within this particular organisation is necessarily true of every organisation, or even of any other organisation. It doesn’t matter - it’s true of this organisation, and that’s the key thing. But, in order to demonstrate the validity, I’ve got to show how did I go from a one-to-one discussion which could be simply me hearing what I want to hear from Person X, and I’ve got all my biases that I bring to bear and therefore I’ve come to an answer... I’ve got to make that very transparent, and very open.

Another word which gets used in this context is ‘reflexive’ - which means that, once this transcript has been drawn up, I’ll go back over it and make sure I think it’s an accurate record of our discussion, and then I’ll send it to you and ask you to validate that you also believe

that's an accurate record of what we said to one another. More than that - if in re-reading it you think, 'Well, I said that on that day, but actually I wish I'd said this, because actually this is worth saying'; or 'I might have said that to you on the day, but I don't agree with it now that I read it back.' - I'll ask you to make those sorts of amendments and supplements to it. I'll do that with all the interviewees, to the extent that they're willing to get involved in that process. So when I say 'reflexive', what that really means is that both the way this is being done, and what's being said, is all open to further critique and analysis. One of the things that I look for when I look back at the transcripts is, 'Oh, I led Person X a bit there.' An element of this sort of approach is that if I think I led you, one of the things I'll write up in my thesis is the extent to which my own biases and my own preconceptions, despite my best efforts, actually did come out in this process and show up in some of what was said.

So we'll not disappear in too many ever-decreasing circles, but that's the nature of it. The practicality of that... is that I'll send some written material back to you, and I'll invite you to continue adding to that as we go. And at a later stage, pre-supposing that you can afford the time to do this, or that some of your colleagues can, as I then begin to interpret what's being said and to write it up into a form where I'm drawing out some findings, some conclusions, I will again pass that back to you and ask you, 'Do you agree with this?', and 'What could you contribute to this?' So we're very much equal partners in the research.

Chapter 5 Organisation C and its journey to excellence - a case study

This chapter introduces the organisation in which I have gathered primary data contributing to the aim of this research programme. It also introduces the research participants whose recollections, perceptions, opinions and interpretations comprise the central component of that data. It proceeds to focus on three particular themes - the research participants themselves; relevant aspects of the Council's background; and its "journey to excellence."

My aim in this chapter is to set the scene about the organisational and human context in which I have gathered the primary data. The chapter will summarise and present extracts from that part of the primary data which concerns the research participants themselves, the organisation itself, its background and development over the years and the current reality of its circumstances and everyday existence. This "scene setting" is a necessary preparation for the three chapters that follow, which will also focus on Organisation C, respectively covering the following aspects of the case study:

- ❑ an analysis of Organisation C's extensive experience of improvement, self-assessment and diagnostic benchmarking
- ❑ a focus in particular and in depth on one specific deployment of the PROBE diagnostic benchmarking tool
- ❑ a broader analysis, pulling together the threads that directly address the aim of this research in the context of Organisation C; exploring whether and how diagnostic benchmarking can play a role as an enabler of organisational improvement.

The data and argument presented in this chapter will establish an understanding of Organisation C, its context, its history, its experience of improvement and benchmarking; and of some individuals who, between them, are key players in Organisation C's continuing story, its continuing efforts to perform, to deliver its services, and to fulfil its stated aim of achieving (or maintaining) "excellence". They have also been key players in the deployment of diagnostic benchmarking within this context.

This chapter is structured in the following sections:

- ❑ Introducing Organisation C
- ❑ Introducing the research participants
- ❑ Naming some (fictitious) names
- ❑ The story of Organisation C's journey and the role of diagnostic benchmarking
- ❑ Further background and history of Organisation C, and its "journey to excellence"
- ❑ Emerging findings
- ❑ Chapter summary

Introducing Organisation C

Organisation C was the third organisation that I approached with a view to conducting in-depth primary research and, as it turned out, was very receptive to this approach, and a very suitable case to study. I had in fact been in contact with this organisation since 1991, when they became involved in a “Best Practice Club” which I was running through a University with which Organisation C developed some strong links. Over the years, various members of Organisation C’s staff have contributed to and benefited from a range of activities that I and various of my colleagues and our partners have arranged, contributed to and ourselves benefited from (including lectures, seminars, training courses, visits to other organisations, benchmarking “common interest groups” and research projects). Throughout this 10-year period, I have taken an interest in Organisation C and its activities, especially those activities and developments which relate to quality improvement and benchmarking.

Organisation C is a local authority, a “council”, in England. I am not going to describe further details about its location, the nature or economics of the geography it covers, its position in the “hierarchy” of local government, and so on, because to do so would be likely to compromise the organisation’s anonymity, and is not necessary to the meaningful reporting of the research and its conclusions. When my formal research “engagement” with Organisation C began, during the autumn of 2003, they had used the diagnostic benchmarking tool “PROBE” (in its various forms) on six occasions (between May 1997 and January 2003). Three of these “PROBEs” had focused on the organisation as a whole; the other three had focused on three different departments or directorates. Organisation C also had experience of using the EFQM Excellence Model, having funded a number of staff to be trained as Excellence Model assessors and made some use of “the Model” within internal business review and planning activities. In addition, the organisation had been and remains active on the local/regional “business excellence scene”, providing sponsorship for local “excellence” and “quality” networking activities, and enabling a number of staff and councillors to be involved in those activities, including acting as assessors on awards schemes based around the Excellence Model.

Organisation C had “set its stall out” some years previously that it was aiming to be an excellent organisation. Its mission statement says that it aims to make the Council, and the geographical area it serves, truly excellent (I have paraphrased the mission statement, rather than quoting it word for word, to protect anonymity). While these sorts of statements can, of course, be nothing more than words on pieces of paper, Organisation C can point to some evidence that these are serious commitments. Perhaps the most persuasive evidence is that, soon after my research engagement with the organisation began in earnest, they received feedback from their “Comprehensive Performance Assessment” (“CPA”, carried out by The Audit Commission) which rated the Council as “Excellent”, placing the organisation among the top 19% (see Table 5.1) of councils in England, according to this “official” rating scheme which:

...is about helping local councils in England improve local services for their communities... CPA looks at how well the council delivers their services, for example education, social care and housing. It also considers how well the council is run, as this will impact on how they deliver their services in the future. (Audit Commission, 2005a)

TABLE 5.1: Comprehensive Performance Assessment ratings of councils in England

Audit Commission CPA rating (as at 14th April 2005)	Number of councils in England achieving this rating	Percentage of councils achieving this rating
Excellent	74	19%
Good	142	37%
Fair	118	31%
Weak	42	11%
Poor	9	2%
TOTAL	385	100%

Source: (Audit Commission, 2005b)

“Excellent Councils” are described as:

... the highest category of achievement in the local government league tables drawn up by the Audit Commission. The Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) process gives an overall assessment of council performance, demonstrating continuous improvement. An excellent council must deliver high-quality services, with both effective leadership and management.

Excellent councils are entitled to a range of new freedoms from Whitehall control and a lighter inspection regime. (I&DeA, 2005)

In the course of my research, I have gathered a substantial amount of evidence about the extent to which Organisation C has been and is “serious” about its commitment to “excellence”. Much of this evidence has emerged from my interviews with Organisation C’s employees and stakeholders, and I will discuss it in this chapter and those that follow in the context of reporting and analysing the data gathered through those interviews. I have also drawn upon a wealth of paperwork made available by the organisation, which is not included in my reference list or bibliography in order to preserve anonymity. Relevant documents include:

- The PROBE Partnership (1997). Service PILOT¹⁹ Benchmarking Feedback - [Organisation C]
- The PROBE Partnership (1997). Service PROBE Benchmarking Report - [Organisation C]
- The PROBE Partnership (1998). Service PILOT Benchmarking Feedback - [Organisation C]
- The PROBE Partnership (2001). Service PROBE Benchmarking Report - [Organisation C] Directorate of Strategic Policy and Regeneration

¹⁹ Service PILOT was a PROBE diagnostic benchmarking tool, an abbreviated and simplified version of “PROBE” itself, designed to be used for an entry-level engagement with diagnostic benchmarking - briefer, less formal, not necessarily facilitated, delivering less sophisticated feedback

- ❑ Organisation C (2001). Directorate of Strategic Policy and Regeneration: Best Value Review 2000/2001
- ❑ The PROBE Partnership (2002). Service PROBE Benchmarking Report - [Organisation C] Housing and Public Services Directorate
- ❑ The PROBE Partnership (2003). Service PROBE Benchmarking Report - [Organisation C] Environmental Services
- ❑ Organisation C (2003). Self Assessment for the Comprehensive Performance Assessment
- ❑ Audit Commission (2004). Comprehensive Performance Assessment Report
- ❑ Organisation C (2004). Corporate & Performance Plan 2004-2005
- ❑ Organisation C (2004). Award Submission for [Regional] Excellence Awards 2004
- ❑ Organisation C (2005). Corporate & Performance Plan 2005-2006
- ❑ Organisation C (2005). Award Submission for [Regional] Excellence Awards 2005
- ❑ Organisation C (2005). Building towards the future [a summary of the organisation's results against 11 "Best Value Performance Indicators"]
- ❑ Organisation C (2005). CPA Corporate Assessment pilot: Self assessment (November 2005)

In recent years (since 2000), there have been at least six external Best Value assessments of areas of Organisation C's activities (this statement and the following details are deliberately somewhat vague to preserve anonymity). The results are listed on the Audit Commission's website (Audit Commission, 2005b). An Audit Commission (Best Value Inspection Service) report has been published for each of inspection, and these reports have provided me with useful additional background about the organisation and the status and performance of its services. At least three inspections have been reported since Organisation C was designated as "CPA Excellent" in January 2004, and all have yielded assessments of "Fair" (e.g. "Fair Service/Promising prospects for improvement", or "Fair Service/Uncertain prospects for improvement"). Clearly these might be seen as rather surprising, and perhaps disappointing, inspection results for an "Excellent" council - a theme upon which some of the research participants will comment later.

Introducing the research participants

As I explained in the previous (methodology and methods) chapter, in describing the participants I wish to preserve their anonymity and minimise the number of “clues” that might allow any reader to identify the people or to identify “who said what?”; and for this reason I have given each participant a fictitious and gender-neutral name. However there are certain facts about the participants that I feel I need to discuss in order that the reader can understand their roles in, and context in relation to, Organisation C’s activities, development and use of diagnostic tools etc. Tables 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4 present some background information about the participants, divided for ease of description into Groups A, B and C.

TABLE 5.2:
Background information about the research participants: Group A

Fictitious names	<p>Bernie</p> <p>Cameron</p> <p>Chris</p> <p>Frances</p> <p>Joe</p> <p>Lee</p> <p>Sam</p>
Background information	<p>These 7 people fulfil a range of roles in the leadership and governance of the Council. Their roles are listed below (in no particular order - the list of roles is <u>not</u> in the same order as the list of fictitious names):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Councillor, Executive Member for Organisational Development (formerly, at the time of the Best Value Review of Regeneration, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Best Value) • Chair of the Joint Trades Unions. Also a Parish Councillor, and was a team member for the PROBE benchmark in the Department of Housing • Chief Executive (formerly Director of Regeneration) • Assistant Chief Executive (in post for 3 months at time of initial interview, having worked previously at another local authority) • Legal, Risk and Insurance Manager • Corporate Procurement Manager (formerly TQM Manager, Organisational Development Manager, Best Value Manager); team member for the 1997 PROBE benchmark • Principal Corporate Development Officer (formerly Best Value Coordinator) <p>Between them, these 7 people have been involved in the work of Organisation C for approximately 140 years, and have been directly involved in much of Organisation C's activity relating to organisational improvement and diagnostic benchmarking.</p>

TABLE 5.3:
Background information about the research participants: Group B - those who were directly involved in Best Value Review of Regeneration and the PROBE benchmark that was part of that Review

Fictitious names	Alex
	Bobby
	Bren
	Les
	Pat

Background information These 5 people were all closely involved with the use of the PROBE benchmarking tool as part of the Best Value Review of Regeneration. One of them led the PROBE team and the Best Value Review itself; 3 were PROBE Team members; one was deeply involved in the Review and indirectly involved in the PROBE benchmarking process itself.

Their job roles at the time of the Review (in 2001) are listed below (in no particular order - the list of roles is not in the same order as the list of (fictitious) names):

- Head of Community Safety, Acting Head of Regeneration
- Valuation & Estates Officer
- Discipline Leader - Graphic Design & Technical
- Head of Planning & Building Control Services
- Discipline Leader - Community Safety

Subsequently, some of these people have moved into new roles, including:

Senior Social Inclusion Officer
 Design and Technical Manager
 Assistant Chief Executive (who, during 2005, moved to a job in another organisation)
 Head of Neighbourhood Initiatives

Between them, these 5 people have worked at Organisation C for approximately 65 years.

TABLE 5.4:
Background information about the research participants: Group C - those who are involved in facilitating and organising PROBE benchmarks

Fictitious name	Background information
Ali	Ali is an accredited facilitator of the PROBE benchmarking tool, a self-employed consultant who facilitates PROBE as a sub-contractor to The PROBE Partnership. Ali has facilitated two PROBE benchmarks within Organisation C, and was assigned to facilitate the PROBE benchmark of "Support Services" which was scheduled to happen in late 2004, then rescheduled for early 2005, and again rescheduled for a date yet to be determined.
Morgan	Morgan is an accredited facilitator of the PROBE benchmarking tool, employed by a University which is a member of The PROBE Partnership. Morgan was the PROBE facilitator when this tool was used as part of the Best Value Review of Regeneration, and has played a coordinating role in the deployment of PROBE in Organisation C and other organisations. Morgan has also been linked with Organisation C for several years as a "Critical Friend."

I will now invite the research participants to introduce themselves, and to provide some accounts of the background, history and development of the Council. At risk of confusing the reader (which I have no desire to do!), I will attribute some of the participants' words to their job title, rather than to their fictitious name, where I judge that to do otherwise would compromise their anonymity.

The Chief Executive who was in post at Organisation C when I began gathering data in late 2003 (whom I will refer to as "Person W") gave his/her approval for me to conduct the research, but preferred not to be interviewed. A few months later, (s)he retired early. I interviewed the **new Chief Executive** after (s)he took up that position, and heard his/her perceptions of the changes that the Council had gone through in recent years, and account of the most recent transition. (S)he described a situation "7 years ago or so" when the Council was characterised by personality clashes, different agendas, poor staff relations and "a culture of managing people that really isn't appropriate in this day and age." The Council had tried a number of different arrangements, one of which had involved a

triumvirate of three Executive Directors leading the Council, and no Chief Executive. This arrangement, apparently, hadn't worked well, and after a particularly problematic episode the new Leader of the Council decided that change was needed:

...a new Chief Exec. was appointed, who was one of the three, and who had a long track record of working here... (S)he was determined to pursue a completely different course of improving the organisation... which exactly matched with the Leader. And I think it was almost out of adversity that this complete change came about... I haven't come across that before, because most councils evolve, and take different steps to adapt to different agendas and circumstances as they change... But I think what was different here was that things needed putting right, and it needed a determined effort. Not an incremental change, but a pretty big, up-front change... pretty dramatic change.

And the staff... [have been] boosted by the CPA result - I think morale is pretty high... We've gone through a period of change over the last year that could have had a destabilising factor, with the last Chief Exec. retiring early, but the Council was determined not to risk any instability, particularly considering... there were only two directors. We had a management team of three when we set up the Arms Length Management Organisation. One of our Directors left to become Chief Exec. of the ALMO, so we've been through a lot of change, including TUPE transfer²⁰ of 500-600 of our staff into a new company, and changing Chief Executive, and completely changing the management team other than the Director of Finance. It was a bit of a tricky period, it could have gone wrong, and there was a period where myself and the Director of Finance managed without other Directors for a good number of months and it was [laughs] a bit hairy at times.

The Chief Executive describes a key feature of the way that Organisation C is managed:

We have an agreement here which... we call our 'tripartite'... the Council is led by a combination of senior management, senior Members and the joint trades unions... we discuss difficult issues up front; the trade unions are involved right from the start on things like single status - we've had that in for four years now... and we don't have the difficulties of the equal

²⁰ Under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations (1981), employees usually transfer to their new employer on the same terms and conditions that applied in their "original" employment - "TUPE transfer". See for example Business Link (2006)

pay claims that many councils in the region and nationally are having to set aside millions to deal with... Because we dealt with it up front, and have dealt with it together.

This explanation puts into context the key role at Organisation C that is fulfilled by **the Chair of the Joint Trades Unions**, who provides some background to that role, and some of the challenges surrounding it. The role is full time, and the Chair is “voted in” every four years at the same time as the local elections, and is seconded into the role:

[Since] the split came with the ALMO, I actually work in [the Council]. I represent... three unions at [the Council], and five unions at the ALMO. Now I think it should have been split again, there should have been a Chair in the ALMO, and one in [the Council]... Now the Audit Commission’s actually questioning my role... what I’m doing at [the] Council might affect [the ALMO]. So I’ve got to be careful what I’m doing in one when I’m going into the other one. Because the service level agreements, all that’s coming in now. So if [the ALMO] don’t use, say, the Personnel Department... if they go somewhere else... it could affect the jobs down at the Personnel Department. If I support that, I could be seen as putting some of my members at risk.

A public information leaflet produced by Organisation C (“Know your councillor”) explains more about “how the council is run”:

The day to day business of the council is conducted through an Executive and a variety of committees and panels. There are ten Executive members - the leader, deputy leader and eight councillors each responsible for a specific portfolio... there are four scrutiny committees responsible for audit, resources, partnerships and service delivery... Six executive panels are responsible for development control and licensing; housing special needs and appeals; employee welfare; licensing appeals; appointments and appeals; and public works contracts monitoring... The council also has a standards committee whose main responsibility is to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by members of the authority...

The Executive Member²¹ for Organisational Development has taken a personal interest and an active role in Organisation C's efforts to improve and to pursue excellence, including its deployment of the diagnostic benchmarking tool PROBE. (S)he explains his/her initial reaction to my request for an interview, and the written brief that I had sent in advance:

...I received this and I looked at the [wording]... especially the references to PROBE... I am in no way an expert on PROBE. I only heard about it when the Housing Department was going to do their exercise and I went along as a participant ... but more as an observer. I've read back, and I can recall the Best Value Review of Economic Development... it was one of the first Best Value Reviews we did, because regeneration was our number one priority. So it was natural that we should do a Best Value Review of that, and I've read some history about that... even though I am responsible for organisation development, I haven't got time to go into each department and just see how PROBE has progressed - that is more or less a responsibility for the person who's the portfolio holder for that particular service. So what I thought it would be best to do was to just write up a little bit about what has happened at [the Council]...

(S)he had in fact made extensive notes, and used them to provide a thorough account of the historical development and current status of the Council, much of which will be drawn upon (anonymously) later in this and subsequent chapters.

The Assistant Chief Executive who was in post when I began interviewing staff at Organisation C described his/her role, and involvement in Organisation C's efforts to improve:

... my role [as] Assistant Chief Executive... is very much leading the organisational development of the Council... I get engaged principally in how the Council delivers the best it can.... but that has led me onto other things... I'm engaging with other councils to help them through the course of my work, but also because of my interest and my personal development plan; and within that... from what I have learned I'm, if you like, partially selling the concept of excellence and the Excellence Model with other people.

²¹ Elected Members (as opposed to "officers") of the Council are referred to as "Members" or

The Assistant Chief Executive role involves leading the Council's Corporate Development Unit. This person was previously Head of Planning, and stepped into this role when the previous Head of the Corporate Development Unit was seconded to some partnership work with neighbouring councils:

...something like 16 months ago... I was seconded into Corporate Development because of the approach of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment process and the need to address that with our high hopes of success; and also the fact that... [the previous Head of the Corporate Development Unit]... was seconded. And I moved into the lead on improving the Council, particularly with CPA in mind, but my own personal agenda and drive to improve performance across the board. My engagement as a planner was a lot more than just dealing with the planning job; I was involved in every single corporate team that was available because of my interest to improve my own services by that engagement. So much so that we have achieved the Charter Mark in Planning, which is about customer excellence; the only one in the Council, and in fact the only one in [this region] for Planning, a very customer-orientated but controversial service. So that was something of an achievement within itself...

Ten months later, the Assistant Chief Executive had moved on to a new job outside Organisation C. There was a **new Assistant Chief Executive** in post, who initially expressed concerns about how useful our interview would be to the research aims, before proceeding to describe how (s)he sees the role:

I've been [here] for nearly 3 months, so I haven't been part of the journey towards excellence... the only concern I had... was with you wanting to know about how [Organisation C] became excellent, whatever that means... I didn't do that... for them, with them, to them... I wasn't here! I can only talk about how I think we can maintain excellence, and what excellence means for me... My role will be in our continued journey towards what's a continuously changing concept of excellence, even in terms of how the Government defines it.

"Councillors". For clarity, I will refer to them throughout this document as "Members".

The Legal, Risk and Insurance Manager is one of several of the research participants who have given very long service to the Council, well over twenty years:

Over that period, worked in a central admin role... what I call the old centre of the organisation... I've managed to gain... quite a detailed insight into the workings of the whole of the Council... More recently - I say more recently, since 1992, so it's not that recent! [laughs] - I've been a key driver for encouraging 'Risk Management' throughout the Authority as well. I've had a few different goes at that, and probably have been more successful over the last three or four years... I believe in... quality services and in 'excellence'... not just excellence within the functions that you carry out, but it's saying, 'How does that measure for the people you are providing it for?'... whoever your customers are. To some extent, you can provide excellence within a bureaucratic, administrative part, but... what I look for are some quite clear outcomes and benefits. I think performance management is... a key component of quality performance. Risk is a key component for that as well... if you can manage the risks... people plan more effectively, they pre-empt, and as a result you hopefully should be getting the end results which are planned for, without the obstacles. Key now is, I believe, people, as well... I've put so much effort into the process of managing performance, and yet if I have the right people in the right posts, a lot of those things just happen. So that's something that's probably developed over the last few years, and I find that in relation to our staff development programme, training and reviews, a lot of emphasis is put into systems and processes, and yet if you do have the right individual doing the job then the systems and processes aren't important, because they [the people] will actually make the difference.

Naming some (fictitious) names

Having introduced a few of the participants “by job title”, I’ll now ask them to introduce themselves again, along with the remaining research participants, disguising their identities further through the use of fictitious names; and to make some introductory comments which will set the scene for the identification of key themes that have emerged through my analysis of the primary data.

Les reflects upon his/her time at Organisation C:

I’ve worked at the Council for five years. There has been a huge shift during that time in terms of the way the Council undertakes its business, the way it manages performance. I think that’s evidenced by the way we’ve gone from what was basically a pretty poorly-performing council to, now, a CPA ‘Excellent’ rated council. That’s happened very much by design, and it’s been a mixture of really strong leadership from the top and a very good and effective corporate support service working underneath that to implement that leadership. And that’s been a real shift. Exercises such as PROBE have helped to shape that. The CPA has had an effect on that, and so has Best Value... they’re all tools that we’ve used to get us to where we are today.

Bren reflects upon his/her interest in excellence, and the roots of that interest:

... ever since I can remember... I have always tried to strive to do the best, but it was me doing the best I could in my job... in terms of ‘excellence’, I have always been motivated by customer excellence, but it was not until over the last couple of years, three or four, that I got engaged in ‘excellence’ as a concept... a lot of that was through Lee’s influence, and Lee’s help to get involved... I tended to pick up tools which I thought, ‘Oh, if I’d had these years ago I would have been flying much earlier.’ And I have personally become very much engaged in excellence as a concept, and the tools... I have developed a personal interest... as a drive to how I can deliver service and how it will affect others’ delivery of service.

Pat sets the scene, and reflects on the PROBE benchmark that (s)he was involved in:

Well I do personally think Organisation C is a really good authority, and I always have. I think [we have good] members of staff working here, and I think we did end up with a good rating... well I think it was a good rating that we got on the final results. And I think that was just down to the staff that Organisation C have here. I just think it's a good place to work...

Pat reflects on the changes that (s)he has seen during the last 20 years, or thereabouts, at Organisation C. (S)he believes that staff are now looked after better than previously, and have more training and educational opportunities; and that the Council gets involved in more customer groups and other "listening" processes: "I think that's happened as a result of the fact that we can't say 'yes', to them straight away, so we need to sort of hear from them as to what the priorities are. . ." However, Pat finds it difficult to accept some of the expectations that seem to be placed upon the organisation and its staff.

I've seen... the number of staff cut in half... And it always amazes me how suddenly with less staff they feel they can become an 'Excellent Authority', and it also takes staff away from doing the actual work that I think the Authority should be doing. So, you create a new department, you have a highly paid officer in charge of doing all these kind of models and Best Value, and that just takes the few staff that you've got remaining away from your diminishing numbers. So I always find it amazing how we spend all this time selling the fact that we're an 'Excellent Authority', there's nobody actually left to do day to day work.

How does Organisation C compare with other local authorities across the country in terms of the changes that Pat is describing? Have some of these changes occurred "across the board"?:

Yeah, I would think so, but I mean I do know a lot of people that have come from different authorities to here, or some colleagues that have left to other authorities, and I do think [Organisation C] is highly spoken of, because I do think it is a good authority to work for.

Frances' involvement as a research participant arose when another of the participants suggested that (s)he would make a useful contribution, albeit that (s)he had not been directly involved in Organisation C's use of diagnostic benchmarking tools. Frances took delight in teasing me when I acknowledged that "...you may or may not be terribly familiar with those particular tools and the way they've been used here...":

I like your choice [of words] – 'may or may not be' - very good! It's okay, I know why [name] has put me forward, because I have some very strong views on... excellence and the key drivers and issues, so that's okay. Whether I'm right is another matter, mind!

As Frances talked, (s)he mentioned the EFQM Excellence Model on several occasions - so was (s)he actually quite familiar with the Model after all?:

No, I'm not really... I haven't been trained up in it. But, I don't know... to me it's just... call it 'EFQM', call it 'bloody common sense', you can call it anything you want, it's just about the same thing. To make a reasoned decision, you have to take into account a number of factors. Not one on its own. And that's what EFQM is. And monitor, review and make sure that... yeah, fine. We seem to have to go through this huge process to do something which I think is common sense.

Bernie worked at another council, "Organisation W", in the fairly recent past, and is able to make some comparisons between that council and Organisation C:

...during the period that I was there, [it was] assessed as a 'Fair Council', which in actual fact was... [felt to be] a mark of achievement, because in the previous years [it had] been... well, if there was a word 'Crap Council', we would have been one of them! [laughs] But the objective at [Organisation W] was to become the best council [of its kind] in England, so they had a very strong aspiration towards excellence as well. So I suppose my experience has been, at [Organisation W], it has been on the journey. [Here] at [Organisation C], it has been quite interesting [comparing Organisation W with] a place that's technically already defined as 'Excellent'... but where you can still see quite a lot of room for improvement.

Lee has been influential from the early stages and throughout the Council's involvement with quality improvement/organisational excellence. S(he) completed the Council's first diagnostic benchmark (using the version of PROBE called "PILOT") and was a team member of the first PROBE team (in what later became the "Corporate Strategy Unit"). Lee's connections to Organisation C go back a lot further than his/her first job for the Council:

...to set the scene on all the history and on [Organisation C], I think it's bigger than just going back ten years, I think it goes back [to] myself being brought up in [this area] and the people that tend to work, that tend to not move on from Organisation C... are characters like myself who were actually brought up [here]...

Lee had ambitions to do a science degree and follow a scientific career, but family circumstances didn't allow this to happen:

I went for some summer vacation work at the leisure centre, because I was a good swimmer and quite sporty at the time, got a position as a lifeguard... it was the boom years for leisure. There were 11 staff per shift. I earned more money than my father was earning... I was playing squash, badminton, swimming... having a life of Riley, and I'm getting paid for it... social functions, used to clean out the pool, you'd then have a break and then you would go and have a sauna or a sun bed and that was part of your duties believe it or not! A member of the public wouldn't turn up with a partner, and they would say 'Can you go and play badminton with them?' 'Yeah, okay, fantastic!'

Lee's career with the Council has encompassed a number of roles, and for the last ten years, or thereabouts, (s)he has been quite heavily involved in the Council's pursuit of improvement and of "excellence." Lee relates an anecdote about an incident which occurred some years ago, when (s)he was attending a national meeting and the question was asked "Who here is interested in excellence?" Lee spoke up: "I am... [Organisation C] is." The room was immediately filled with laughter: "People were thinking, 'What a ridiculous thought - [Organisation C] being interested in excellence.' But look at us now!"

Joe tells a similar story about the time when the Council's reputation was rather poor, although (s)he feels that this reputation was something of a relic of the former organisations which were merged to create Organisation C during a reorganisation of local government:

I can recall the very first conference I went away to, in 1973, [in City H]. The Council had only been in existence a few months... I was with another Member, and we were in this room having a cup of tea - probably 30, 40 or 50 people in [the room] - and this lady said, 'Where are you from?' And I said, '[Organisation C]' And within two seconds, there was absolute silence in the room, and the lad with me was saying, 'What's up? What's up?' And she said, 'Oh yes, we've all heard of [Organisation C].' When I thought about it later... 'Well what you have heard about is [the old Council], which was notorious throughout the country for the perks that people had, and the conferences they attended...' And I thought, 'Well, [Organisation C] has only been alive a few months, it hasn't even started.' Yet we had the stigma of [the old Council].

Joe and Lee jointly described to me a current project that Joe is involved in, working with an association of councils in Organisation C's region of England. Joe said that the discussions reminded him of a horse race: "They [the councils] all think they are winning, everybody thinks they are near the finish line. They're not. They are so spread out, from the leaders, to the back end." The job for the association is to help those at the back to "bunch up", to get closer to those at the front... get them all to a similar standard:

But where Organisation C is at now, and where its going now, is based on 10 to 15 years of development... cultural development. A lot of the councils are that far behind - 10 to 15 years. The trouble is you can't short circuit that development... It will take those other councils 10 to 15 years' development - culturally - to get to where Organisation C is now...

Alex has been impressed by Organisation C's approach to managing and developing people:

...I found that very encouraging when I first came here - because they didn't just look at your role, they looked at your capabilities, and what interests you had, and what experiences you had... I do think you're encouraged to use your talents here. You're not put in a situation where you are at a certain level, and you cannot go beyond that level. You've got the likes of Person W, Lee and Cameron who are very good talent scouts... they can recognise the potential in people, and they try and bring that out in them. And they, along with [Bren], were a good little team to get the Best Value Review... bring the best of all the processes that you had to go through into the frame.

'Customers are seen as partners' - as I said, they have got a partnership approach to working, and they certainly develop that, and they keep on developing it.

Bobby has an aversion to "hype" and jargon. I told him/her that, in the process of interviewing others at the Council, I had been told several times about the "journey to excellence" that the Council had been on. *"Is that phrase familiar to you?"*, I asked. *"Is that what it feels like working here? Is this an organisation that is on a 'journey to excellence'?"*:

[Chuckles] Ummm. I really don't like the hype about that one, or any of the other glib phrases that seem to be appearing more and more. Despite that, I'm a great believer in 'continuous improvement'. I think anybody who has got any commitment to what they do at work will believe in that. I just sometimes feel as though we're stifled by red tape in local authority, and things don't always move as fast as they should - the PROBE exercise is proof of that.

'A journey into the unknown' is more like how it feels.

Sam has worked at Organisation C for more than 30 years. (S)he has seen some positive developments, but is not impressed by some aspects of the current situation:

I would say over the last ten years it's changed, and that's through, I think, the Leader... I think [s]he's a good leader... gets people on board... likes to involve the Trade Unions, the management, the Members and try to work them together. That was working fine, but I think this split... the split from the ALMO²²... some Members want to sever the link altogether. I'll give you an instance - we're setting a contact centre up, so it's the first point of contact, the resident or tenant will phone you... So that's fine, but if she reports [an issue relevant to the services delivered through the ALMO], she's going to have to be passed on to another, which is [the ALMO]. Now I think [the ALMO] should be part of that, but the Members, because they are getting a lot of complaints about [the ALMO], want that out the way. And it's like a 'them and us.' So we need something in between now...

Cameron also has very long service at Organisation C. His/her first job there was a front-line role. Over time (s)he became active in trade union activities, and was noticed by someone in a senior role at the Council, who commented on his/her constructive style of negotiating, and suggested that (s)he should apply for a "management" job:

... I went from wearing overalls on a Friday night to a suit and tie on a Monday morning. I had been there two days... and I thought it was the biggest mistake I had ever made in my life. I didn't like it, I felt as though people were looking at me... saying '(S)he shouldn't be a Principal Officer after driving vans and digging roads, it isn't right...' I had to get used to administration systems... I didn't know how they worked and probably I still don't [laughs], because I'm crap with paper! It was a real difficult time. But I had set myself out a three-year plan... 'the first year I'm going to do the job I'm paid to do, and I'm going to learn about the Council's systems...'

The plan seems to have worked. Since that time, Cameron has been deeply involved in managing aspects of Organisation C's work, and in its efforts to improve and develop.

²² The "ALMO" is an "Arms Length Management Organisation" which is managing some of Organisation C's services.

Chris offers some thoughts about the meaning of “excellence”, reflecting upon Organisation C’s CPA designation as an “Excellent Council”:

...no organisation is perfect, and yet excellence seems to almost pretend it is... as one of our members of staff keeps saying, ‘excellence doesn’t mean perfection’... and it never can. But as long as we get complaints where we haven’t perhaps dealt with people as well as we might, where our performance in crucial areas is struggling to catch up... as long as there are issues like that then... we will never be perfect. But we need to improve our key areas of performance, and we’re making some progress towards that. Over this last year our recycling performance has gone up, our benefits performance has gone up quite dramatically... And we’ve knocked about 3 days off our sickness figures. But having said that, we still have a poor record of sickness with 11 days per member, for every single member of staff. And when you think that large numbers of those have taken no sick leave over the last year it shows that there are still some key issues there. So there’s a lot that we need to build on.

Ali is an accredited facilitator of the PROBE benchmarking tool, a self-employed consultant who facilitates PROBE as a sub-contractor to The PROBE Partnership. (S)he has facilitated two PROBE benchmarks within Organisation C. In a former role, as a senior manager at a large industrial company, Ali was part of a decision to opt for early use of the EFQM model; but (s)he feels that that model has been “prostituted”:

It was a board room tool, and in many organisations it is used in the middle of the organisation, and the board room hasn’t got a clue what they’re doing... And therefore there’s limited use in it, despite the fact that it’s an excellent tool. But it is also time consuming, and it’s something that, unless you’ve had a fairly extensive amount of training and you have some understanding of what quality concepts are, you probably are not going to get the most out of it.

When I started to learn about PROBE, it seemed to answer some of those difficulties that we’d had... It was a faster version, it didn’t require anybody to be trained, it was relatively cheap... might not seem it when people were paying the fee, but if you’re paying training fees for the EFQM assessment and this sort of thing, you would realise how cheap it was. And you could apply it, I think, in a variety of circumstances. EFQM was difficult to apply at departmental level, we found. Even in large departments, some people would struggle

Chapter 5 Organisation C and its journey to excellence - a case study

with it, and I'm talking large departments of 300-500 employees, so we're not talking micro businesses. And therefore my involvement - my delight in a sense, of working with PROBE - was that it cut through a lot of these issues. You could actually get the guy who sweeps the car park to offer a view, which was every bit as valid as other people's perception of the organisation. So I think it had a wider role or a wider potential to bring more people in for assessment in the organisation than you typically get.

Morgan, too, is an accredited facilitator of PROBE, and was the facilitator when PROBE was used as part of the Best Value Review of Regeneration at Organisation C. Morgan also plays a role in the strategic and operational management of the PROBE benchmarking scheme, which involves him/her in the development of the tool and of the ways in which it is marketed and deployed:

There have been 3000-plus PROBEs done, of all different types, in 30-odd countries. Now, I just have a hunch from a small amount of sampling that a lot of companies who do PROBE do it and forget it. Which is... a heck of a shame. ... a hunch that more people don't do anything with it than do. But those who do do something with it, like [Organisation C], do get a lot of benefit out of it. And I'm saying that because of a number of companies that I've rubbed shoulders with, and I look for evidence, you know, factual, evidence-based results. What are they doing? What were they not doing? Before and after?

The story of Organisation C's journey and the role of diagnostic benchmarking

The data presented so far in this chapter have briefly introduced all fourteen of the research participants and provided some background about their background/careers, their current roles and their interest in “excellence”. Some of the participants - particularly those who have been quite deeply involved in Organisation C's improvement-focused activities - have told me their stories in a bit more detail. **Bernie**, for example, expresses the view that in many ways (s)he sees similarities between Organisation C and Organisation W (where (s)he worked until quite recently), despite the fact that one has been rated as CPA “Fair”, the other as CPA “Excellent”:

... there are some things about [working in] an ‘Excellent Council’ that are somewhat off-putting in terms of career development... if you’re the sort of person who likes to improve things, you could have this view that coming to an ‘Excellent Council’, there wasn’t that much work to do... I was making a difference at Organisation W. But the first thing I would say is that it’s been quite surprising to me how much similarity there is between Organisation C’s situation and Organisation W’s situation - particularly in terms of service performance.

Bernie and colleagues at Organisation W initiated some improvement initiatives:

We put in what we called ‘performance improvement teams’ which focused on a particular area of service that was weak. For example we did one on ‘Planning’ turn-around time... We would do things like process mapping... a bit of comparison, we would look at whether there were any management issues or any human resource issues or any morale issues... And it was *extremely* successful. The one on ‘Planning’ took us from bottom quartile to top quartile within a period of about a year and a half... It was *that* successful... because it was putting the power with the people who can actually make a difference in terms of performance... performance doesn’t get improved by putting a system in place... you can have the most wonderful manual of performance management in the world, but if you don’t get the people involved in improvement, it just won’t happen... And now I think when the CPA Inspectors go into [Organisation W] again... they will get an assessment of ‘Good’, and it will be heavily influenced by the rate of improvement. And that seems to have had a knock on effect on performance indicators across the board. The number that are in the top quartile is rising all the time...

Now, the reason I've gone into that in some detail is that when I came to [Organisation C], the service performance in a lot of areas is actually no better than that at [Organisation W]. And I found it quite interesting that [Organisation C] had been assessed as 'Excellent' with a similar performance level to [Organisation W] which was only assessed as 'Fair'. And certainly one of the things we need to do here at [Organisation C], is to raise our game on service performance. So I think the experience I've got at [Organisation W] of doing that will actually help us to raise our game here. Because [the Government have] said in their new CPA methodology that they're going to raise the bar on service performance, so the sort of performance that got you three stars last time will only get you two stars this time. Now [Organisation C] is going to fall foul of that unless it really gets it finger out, basically. So that's one of the areas we're going to have to [do some work]. Now, in terms of the improvement models and diagnostic tools and all that stuff, I think that the simple tool that we used at [Organisation W] is the best way to do that here as well. Because one of the really good things I've noticed about [Organisation C], and this is a difference to [Organisation W], is that the staff are much more open to risk and change and trying new ways of doing things.

Bernie's ability to compare Organisation C with a "peer" organisation provides a valuable insight here; and his/her analysis that Organisation C needs to substantially improve its service performance raises significant questions about the legitimacy and sustainability of the Council's "Excellence" designation. Bernie is not alone in pointing out that Organisation C's service performance may fall short of what would reasonably be expected of an "Excellent" organisation. It seems that Organisation C faces a challenge, to ensure that the service performance it is delivering matches its aspirations of excellence, and the widely-expressed belief among the research participants that it is a much-improved organisation in terms of its "culture" and internal processes.

Lee continues the story of his/her own employment history at Organisation C. Compulsory Competitive Tendering was making an impact, and Lee “saw the writing on the wall for Leisure”, and got an opportunity to take a job which turned out to be his/her introduction to the field of “Quality”:

...I decided that I would make a break... and write quality into contracts. In those days it was ISO 9000²³. I enjoyed that, and then I thought, ‘There must be something better than this in quality’... because at first I really believed in ISO 9000, and then I started to disbelieve... ‘What a load of nonsense this is...’ About 1991, we got involved with the Best Practice Club... started to speak to private sector organisations who were about three years ahead of us... So I went to the boss, and I said, ‘I’d like to do a Masters degree in TQM, because I think that’s where we’re going with this.’ And (s)he said, ‘Spot on, excellent, go for it.’ Never looked back really...

Lee recalls that, during the early years of his/her employment at the Council, it was a thoroughly unpleasant place to work; but substantial changes have taken place over a lengthy period:

...you had this reputation locally of corruption, nepotism, local authorities were... absolutely the worst places to work. But there was a hardcore of people, in my view, that felt, ‘We want to make the world a better place... and we’re not going to give in.’ One of the reasons I’ve stayed with [Organisation C] ... is because they allow me to get on and do things, if I couldn’t do that I would go to a place where I could achieve things and do things for the right reasons... It started to change, very slowly to start with, and a lot of good people were maybe forced out of the organisation because they had the bottle to make the change... we might praise the people that we’ve got here today, but it started many, years ago by characters who had the bottle to stand up and say ‘enough is enough.’

And then, probably ten years looking at continuous improvement... The nature of quality in those days, you didn’t really have a boss... I was allowed to just wander off and dabble with this and dabble with that, and got involved with benchmarking... and when they saw major successes... And I’ll give you a perfect example of one - Payroll. I was asked to go in

²³ ISO9000 is an international standard for Quality Systems

and benchmark Payroll with another three authorities. Now, I went into our Payroll section, and there was literally a guy who was photocopying some timesheets, putting them into a file and putting them on the shelf. And I said, 'What are you doing that for?', and he said 'cause that's my job.' I went, 'Okay, right... but what's the outcome? What's the purpose? What's the end result? What are you getting out of it? There must be something.' 'Oh, you'd better go and talk to the Payroll Manager, I just do what I'm told.' So I went to the Payroll Manager, and I said, 'Well, is there good reason for this?', and he said 'There is.' I said, 'What is it?', and he said, 'Well, when I've thought about it, I'll let you know!' And what I found was, bit by bit across the organisation, we'd got involved with practices [which] somebody at some point in time had said, 'This is what you need to do', and we never, ever looked back as to - was there any cost benefit? Was it getting any results? What was the purpose?

As a result of that exercise, we saved the Authority... it was absolutely something stupid like about £60,000. We reviewed and restructured that area, changed business processes, and made savings through natural wastage. And the bosses at the time were going, 'This is like major money.' And I thought to myself, 'But this is so simple - there must be more and more.' And as time got on, over the years, we've found loads and loads of avenues of continuous improvement, savings - 'Why are we doing this? Why are we doing that?'... But you can also get a bad name as a result of that... 'Who are these people coming in, telling us what to do, upsetting the applecart, creating mayhem? They are always on about change. We've just settled down, and they come back, and do the same again.'

So what I found very quickly was, 'If we're not very careful here, and if we don't get the support from the top guys...' And I was in the middle management position, and those above me... there were still some dinosaurs there. 'If I don't get buy-in from the top level, then it isn't my problem really, so leave alone.' So there was a bit of a... for me, a bit of a lull. I could only go so far until I had that senior commitment... I was in danger of stepping on too many toes, without senior level support. If you think of the sigmoid curve, our improvement process started to dip, and I thought 'Well, private sector, they're like three years ahead of us, I wouldn't have to go through this with them.' So I started to think about moving into the private sector. But then I thought to myself, 'Wait a minute, everybody I've spoken to has said you really need to go through that lull to come up the other end, because if you haven't you'll not understand what it's all about. And it was the best advice I was ever given. You

really have to go through that process to understand change management. And so we started to tackle... what we had then was the Management Team and Corporate Support Team. I found it very, very, very hard and made lots of enemies, but I also made a lot of good friends, friends I've still got today. And I was starting to realise that we had started at the bottom, we had implemented all of these processes, the staff and the trades unions were really onboard. And I was thinking 'Well, this is strange.' And when you got to the management level, they didn't really want to know. 'It's alright you prodding around down there, but don't look at us at this level.' So I found that one of the hardest bits, to be brutally honest, over the years...

But, again, bit by bit, those people started to move on and move out, and we started to bring in credible people who experience of continuous improvement. And now we have got people in place, I believe, within the Management Team - who understand continuous improvement, Best Value; who understand this is like a business now... we're not playing with public money, it is a business, and the work that we do and our unit does has some value, and gives value.

Lee's engagement with what was then called the "Chief Officers' Management Team" prompted them to complete a self-assessment of Organisation C through the lens of the EFQM Excellence Model. That initial self-assessment yielded a score which Lee knew to be rather high - if it had been confirmed through a formal "awards-style" assessment process, Lee knew that this score would have placed the Organisation in the running to win the "European Excellence Award":

...I found the Business Excellence Model in the early 1990s, floated it past the Chief Officers' Management Team, and they were scoring themselves as European Winners - a score of over 600 out of 1,000 - as most organisations do when they start off. And I got a lot of flack when I turned around and said, 'You've got this wrong, guys.' One or two took it very, very personally - you know, 'I'm a Director, and who are you to tell me that I'm not very good?' And I just said, 'Look, okay, but do you want to get better? Do you want to stay as you are? I can only tell you what I've found through this process.' And then we had a [person] called [G] arrive, and [G] couldn't believe that we had somebody at [Organisation C] who was doing this work. (S)he'd worked at [Organisation Q - a larger council]... and they had started the process. [G] couldn't believe that [Organisation C] was getting involved in work like this. Again, what I found though, it was a few individual people who were

pushing and promoting this, and the same few individual people exist today. Part of the CPA process... I know I'm jumping massively but to emphasise a point, we got involved in the Path Finder for the CPA process, Comprehensive Performance Assessment, and what they found was that if five or six people in the organisation moved on - who would keep this momentum going? And how would we sustain it? And we quickly realised that it wouldn't happen, it would just die with those characters. So, there's been... in the last couple of years, a massive move towards creating and developing the human resources, so that when people do move on, there are people behind ready to take over. In the past local government was very much 'dead men's shoes'... if I was old enough, and my boss died... I would move into my boss' shoes regardless of how good I was. That's all gone... there's a proper process now in place that you've got to be the right person for the job, you've got to have the capabilities for that job. And we've brought in all sorts of mechanisms and tools to help people have an informed decision on that, and especially the Elected Members.

Over the years, Lee's continuing interest in improvement has led him/her to learn about and try out a number of models and approaches. In recent years, (s)he has studied and qualified in Neuro Linguistic Programming:

I started to get involved in psychology, which has ended up me doing... the Master Practitioner in NLP. This has helped me to realise that I can influence what I can influence. I can't always be responsible for other people... I was taking that responsibility onboard, thinking, 'Well, I'm the one doing right, but, at the end of the day, I'm causing a lot of pain for them.' But if this organisation is to move on, unfortunately that's what it is all about - it's making the hard decisions.

... a lot of my work now is cultural change, persuading people, guiding people, trying to take the pain away. And I've really moved away from sometimes going home and, to be honest with you, some weeks, really feeling I've had a really good beating or a good battering... to enjoying the work again. I knew what I was doing was right, I was enjoying the work, the bit I didn't like was this pain I seemed to cause. But... that had a lot to do with those who were responsible for managing the Authority at the highest level. And when you talk to quality people, this often comes out - quality people tend to take responsibility for things that the senior management should be taking responsibility for...

Cameron described earlier his/her initial discomfort with the role of a “manager”. (S)he got over this discomfort, and proceeded to work with colleagues to face up to some new challenges, and to explore what Organisation C could learn from other organisations :

[During] the second year, I thought, ‘I’ll go and make my mark, and I’m going to try and impress my beliefs and values on the Public Services Directorate... the Council’s commercial limb, and I was part of a management team. [There were five other members of the management team], and I decided to try and just - not in a bullying way, but just in a very humble way, just to try to express my beliefs and values about equality... and trying to break away from this ‘them and us’ position. I suppose I would do that given the trade union background. But the third year... we had to start bidding for contracts under Compulsory Competitive Tendering. And I thought to myself, ‘Wait a minute, we’ve got trade union people who want to retain their employment with the Council because of the terms and conditions. We have Contracts Managers, who, if they lost contracts, wouldn’t have anybody to manage; therefore they wouldn’t have a job... each side wants to do the same thing, but they’re just going about it in different ways.’ And that’s when I set up this first quality circle, and it was 14 gardeners, including some landscape people. We had to bid for the first council contract... I got those people together... we all hear this word ‘empower’, it’s just new to local government. I said, ‘Look, we have to bid for this contract, the price has to be in by September, it’s January now, let’s work out a timetable of how we’re going to do this.’ And I took a big personal gamble, but I did it, and asked those people to go away and do their own benchmarking in groups of four. So, through their trade union contacts, through officer contacts, they went to different councils... and they found out who had lost contracts, who had won contracts, why they’d lost, why they’d won; I asked them specifically to think, not about what was won and what was lost, but why?... and they came back and said, ‘Well, if our competitors are A, B and C... this is their employment practices, this is their working practice. If we can match them with X, Y and Z, we think we are on to a winner.’ And those people really... formed the contract price and decided on the new working practices. And I touched wood a bit, because perhaps more by good luck than good management we won that contract, and that set the scene for saying, ‘Well, quality circles do work.’ So that was my first dabbling into changing the way the Council approaches managing the work force.

Interviewer: *What sort of timing are we talking about there?*

We’re looking at... 12 years ago.... Early nineties...

Further background and history of Organisation C, and its “journey to excellence”

Between them, the research participants have been able to provide a rich and detailed picture of Organisation C as it was in its early days and as it is now; and a variety of accounts of and perspectives upon the developments over the years. Some of them have readily (and unprompted by me) described those developments as a “journey to excellence.” Others have not volunteered to attach such a label to the Council’s story and, when asked whether it would be a fitting description, some are a little skeptical.

Excellence is, of course, somewhat difficult to define. Nevertheless, unlike organisations in many other sectors, local authorities do have an “official” designation of “Excellence” - and Organisation C has not only aspired to it, it has achieved it. **The Chief Executive** explains the significance of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment designation of “Excellence”, which Organisation C was given by The Audit Commission in 2004:

[T]hat means that against a set range of criteria, the Council has been judged by external inspectors that included peer challenging a number of different elements. We’ve been assessed as having ambitions, skills in prioritisation, focus, skills in learning... our achievements have been recognised. We’re financially secure. So it is the most official stamp of approval of rating of the Council, which allows this council to judge how it has performed against others... It assessed us on a number of our services as well, but that was only one measure of excellence, of performance, and I would like to move on from the CPA judgement of ‘Excellence’ and really improve services to make sure that the [public] sees our services as being excellent as well. Because, you know, excellence is a bit of a poisoned chalice sometimes, because if you don’t unblock somebody’s drains the day they need seeing to, it’s hardly an excellent service. So we’re only as good as the last contact that one of our residents had with us.

Organisation C voluntarily participated in the Audit Commission's "Pathfinder" project, when the Commission was trying out the Comprehensive Performance Assessment approach for the first time:

I was part of the CPA Pathfinder, and that drive in itself, putting ourselves through an inspection and helping frame the CPA methodology, gave us an extra boost that ensured that a year before we had to go through it we knew what we had to do to go from what was seen as a 'good Good' [i.e. high up in the 'Good' category, getting close to 'Excellent'] at the time, to being an 'Excellent Authority'. So I think that the Council believes, I believe, very strongly in continuous improvement, continuous challenge, and inspection, because it really focuses the mind on what you need to do to improve. Now the Council needs to ensure that the things that we are being tested on are the right ones so that we continue to deliver our priorities - because in the pursuit of excellence it should be around the pursuit of excellence in the impact we have on our residents, not necessarily the pursuit of excellence just for a streamlined organisation for its own sake, or to suit the Government on a number of criteria that perhaps aren't very meaningful for [Organisation C].

The Chief Executive responded to my questioning, when I asked him/her to confirm whether, in his/her view, the CPA "Excellence" rating is meaningful, and that the assessment is a rigorous process:

Oh absolutely. And we went all out to get it, and my challenge really in becoming Chief Exec. after getting the status... is to make sure that we keep that standard high and that we move on apace. Because I'm very aware that we got the CPA Excellence status despite having pretty average performance against a number of key services. So our drive has got to be around building on that Excellence status, and actually making it more meaningful. But it certainly is very meaningful. It gave a tremendous boost to the Council; it gives a tremendous profile...

The Chief Executive is quite clear that, while (s)he is pleased that Organisation C has achieved CPA Excellence status, it is the perception of local people that matters most, and "excellence" in their eyes is a tougher target. (S)he also highlights the fact that

Organisation C's "Excellent" designation is likely to result in a lighter touch in future CPA inspections, and/or longer timescales between inspections, and regards this as an additional challenge, because:

...the fact that you have an inspection coming up, and I know life shouldn't have to be like this, but it really does focus the mind on making sure that your performance management framework is in place, that you're looking at it very regularly, you're putting things right where they're going wrong. And what we will have to do because we won't be inspected and assessed [as rigorously, or as frequently], is that we will have to invent some sort of process for ourselves around self assessment, but also looking probably to bringing in some form of external assessment and inspection, even if that is just to inform ourselves.

This account of the current situation at Organisation C, from its Chief Executive, suggests that this is an organisation which, having undergone rigorous external scrutiny and having been assessed as being in the highest possible category as an "Excellent Council", is pleased to receive this accolade but is not satisfied with its own performance. Do the Chief Executive's colleagues share this understanding of Organisation C's situation in 2006?

Alex's view of the meaning of the CPA Excellence designation is quite simple:

Well to me it means that we've achieved a specific standard, but we need to maintain that standard and improve that standard, and how can we do it? So it's 'What's the next process please? Can I be part of it? I want to be part of it'...

Bobby, though, has some doubts. I asked Bobby "*In the Comprehensive Performance Assessment, this Council has come out as being an 'Excellent Council.'* Is it an excellent council?" Bobby's reply was:

[Long pause. Laughs] Is this on the record?

Interviewer: *Yes! But it won't be attributed. You can choose not to answer if you want to!*

[Laughs]. Well, I spoke to a member of senior management a while ago about this... (I won't mention any names) and said at the time I didn't think we were, although, I did think the people who put the CPA submission together did a really good job and they deserved a bit of credit for that... Maybe we are, I don't know. Compared to other authorities, we might be...

Interviewer Dave Yarrow: *It's difficult, isn't it? When you work in a place, you see the warts and all, don't you?*

Yes, I suppose you're right, maybe at the time I was just frustrated by the lack of progress we were making in certain areas that I thought were important. Anyway, reading off a sheet of league tables, authority by authority, is one thing, but seeing what they are actually up to is another thing.

Bren described the Council as it was in the 1980s, and how it has changed on its way to achieving the "Excellent Council" designation:

The Council was.... a typical council [of its type]... everything was much of a muchness, very close, virtually a family, but was sort of just delivering the services that it had to. There was a focus in the early 90s about having to improve and get better and that came from a number of sources... the impact of the [decline of the traditional local employment base], where we had to do something, a massive task to address... the influence of the Audit Commission starting to significantly get more involved in how councils perform, and I think that's on a strong upward curve, and you can trace that through the Best Value Review and modern local government through to CPA and engagement in a whole host of activity, and latterly their current strategic development which is much more engaging and helping councils... they've always been there to help, but they are now getting links with things like the IDeA and getting much more help to local councils. I think the requirements of people as well, customers, over the years, the better the councils have got, and improved in terms of what it was delivering with its partners, the higher the expectations that our customers have got, and the higher expectations of Members and senior management and staff about how they were handled.

Chapter 5 Organisation C and its journey to excellence - a case study

...you're moving through a life of improvement... there was a lot of achievement, there was a massive task to address... since 1951 something like 75,000 jobs were lost... and the beginning of the 90s saw another 4,000 jobs, and... the [employment base] had not only delivered jobs, [but also] the housing... the social fabric. And we had to make sure that we had the capacity to be able to get the jobs, get the investment... and through the Council improving in terms of how it structured itself, learning constantly, continually learning, clearly elements of excellence growing and expanding and us learning from our experiences, we have been on an upwards improvement road and in my view well on the approach to excellence as an organisation. Perhaps that has been measured to some extent by the Audit Commission's judgement that we are an 'Excellent Council'... which was this year... it's quite a significant achievement. And if somebody asked me one thing why we thought we were excellent, it is because we know where we are poor, and we know how we can address that to put it right, and we have got the courage and conviction to talk about it openly, decide on action and then work to deliver it.

I think we probably work on fumes at times, but... that's the fundamental basis of, I think, why we are an excellent organisation. I think in terms of our development, that news to us was great, but we knew we are not an excellent organisation, we are an 'Excellent Council' site in CPA terms, but... we have got miles to go.... but there is no lack of commitment to do that. We immediately changed... it wasn't our mission, it was sort of sat in our performance management framework... 'we feel we are a Good CPA council, we want to be an Excellent one'; we've changed that to 'we are an Excellent CPA council and we want to be the best council in the country.' ...our vision is [paraphrasing: to make this area excellent]... we've re-looked over the last year and we still think that is relevant... that is what we have to aim for; and I think it is very unlikely that we are going to come to the situation where, 'We've achieved that and so we'll change it.' And we are constantly looking at that and we still feel, 'Well, that's what's driving us.' We've trained something like forty people in the Business Excellence Model; personally I don't see that we are getting the full benefit of that, because they are not being used, but we are plugging away at that.

Lee sums up his/her perception of developments at Organisation C in recent years, and explains the Council's philosophy about external assessments, and how the PROBE diagnostic benchmarking tool came into the picture:

In the last ten years, the changes that have gone on in Organisation C have been absolutely incredible. We've got a really good relationship with the Audit Commission, other authorities question how Organisation C has achieved what it has achieved. It is about people, and it's about a cultural shift - that's what we found loud and clear.

...So going back, to give a bit of emphasis on 'How did PROBE come into all of this?' We started to float loads of tools and techniques... to cherry-pick the tools and techniques we thought that would get us from A to B, looked at the Best Value legislation [when it] came out. And I just sat down one day and I read through a load of Best Value material and I realised that this new legislation was based on the fundamentals of TQM. I convinced senior management to volunteer to have an inspection of revenues and benefits ahead of the legislation, before we had to do it. That was hard, to say the least. But as a result of that, we've never looked back... and there have been some really positive outcomes as a result.

...In addition, I should mention that the Leader of the Council at the time was of the old fashioned school. We had a new Leader who came in just prior to that, very young, very dynamic, who said, 'I don't want to talk about the past... yes, our heritage is something we should be interested in... but there is no future in the past... let's move on and let's look out there and see how the rest of the world is doing it, and let's do it better.'

So we used various tools and techniques to roll out the Best Value legislation. The result of our Revenues and Benefits inspection was 'One star - likely to improve.' Other organisations who are, shall we say, cash rich authorities, didn't come anywhere near us. And we started to build a really good working relationship with the Audit Commission, because we had been a volunteer and they were learning as well, it was a learning process for them. But they couldn't believe how honest and open an organisation we were at that time, and the Best Value legislation was about that transparency, and the inspectors said, 'How is Organisation C like this, when the majority of authorities don't want to know?' There's a realisation within the organisation of where we are and how effective we are. We'll always bring in an independent assessor to tell us really what we already know, as reality check. And that assessor is needed just to say, 'You're not that good, you've got a long way to go.'

We've used that philosophy to continually improve. So when an assessor comes in, we sit down, we get the feedback report - very rarely will we say, 'You're wrong.' We'll say, 'Well, what do you mean by that exactly?' And sometimes we've actually said, 'Well, we agree with you, but you don't go far enough - can you really say what you mean? You've been quite nice with us, we don't want you to be nice, we want you to tell the truth.' That's then taken away, an action plan is drawn up, and we continually improve as a result.

As we approach the end of this chapter, and prepare to move on to explore Organisation C's experiences of diagnostic benchmarking, I will give the last word in this chapter to Ali, the experienced PROBE facilitator who has facilitated two PROBE benchmarks within Organisation C and has been "pencilled in" since 2004 to facilitate the planned PROBE within "Support Services." Ali builds upon his/her earlier comments about the benefits of the PROBE tool, which (s)he believes to be easier and often more practical to apply than the EFQM Excellence Model, and to be capable of enabling an organisation to involve its people in assessment very effectively; and comments on his/her experience of Organisation C's engagement with diagnostic benchmarking:

The other thing I really like about PROBE is some of the spin offs, because as a practical TQ type manager, one of the things you were always trying to get was a rapid buy-in... PROBE gives... ownership of the outcome to the people who did it... that's one of the strengths. It's not one of these things where you do the analysis, somebody does something with it, and then a few weeks later you receive the results and if you're lucky you might, if you're a member of the team, hear of it, but the chances are the guy who sweeps the floor wouldn't. So the fact that it... gave that instant response... people could relate to it very quickly.

I've also found, because of that, that you do get this ownership of the result, and a willingness for the people who are on those teams to continue to be involved with improvement issues. And in some of the companies I've been in... if it's a first for them, that team sometimes has stayed together as the company's improvement team, which has proved quite useful to them. I think the difficulty with some of these tools... it's easier [using the PROBE tool] to keep the diagnosis apart from the action planning... It also appeals to me, because... when I was in the industry, when I was telling those TQ Managers and Business Excellence Managers, to almost say to people, 'Look, you need to know where you want to be, you need to know where you are, you need to have a plan to close that gap, and you need

to have measurement to know how far you are closing the gap.’ And I think PROBE, at a cost effective level, and a time effective level, gives that ability. So there are spin offs that I didn’t appreciate would come out of PROBE when I started facilitating, which I have seen in action.

The approach to action planning is also quite interesting... some large organisations who are well versed in action planning don’t have any difficulties because they tend to use PROBE as perhaps one of a series of tools... then they pull it together into a single plan for improvement that doesn’t generally involve the facilitator... But some of the other organisations, where perhaps improvement activity is relatively new, then I think they welcome the opportunity to have that action planning session.

Coming back to [Organisation C], the thing that’s impressed me is... just the range of people... who have been involved... the commitment of those people and the honesty really of those people in completing the questionnaire... and looking at it quite clinically in a sense... If I was critical of some of the public sector organisations I’ve done, I think they felt there was another badge to hang on the wall... ‘We’ve been PROBEed, and we scored x.’ And in some of those organisations, I have to say particularly public sector... some of the people always seem to be trying to sort of increase the score, rather than come down to earth and just say what actually is it.

...one of the other things that really struck me [at Organisation C] was the involvement of some of the Elected Members... on the last one I did, one of the Elected Members... announced [his/her] presence and I thought, ‘Oh, this is a dimension I’ve not had before. This could be interesting in the sense of is this going to be a political sort of comment rather than the strict sort of benchmarking of the organisation?’ And I was very pleasantly surprised that this [person] actually was a trained EFQM assessor who knew exactly where PROBE fitted inside the organisation and what they were trying to do with it, and in fact was very helpful. In fact, (s)he was probably... even more critical than actually some of the people who were on the team... His/her contribution was superb... because it was quite clear for the other people around the table that this Elected Member wasn’t trying to gild the lily. (S)he was looking for an accurate assessment of where the organisation was.

What they’ve done with the results I haven’t a clue, because we’ve not done... I’ve not done any action planning with them... all I’ve done is the facilitation, produced the report and then sort of walked away.

Emerging findings

The purpose of this chapter has been primarily to introduce Organisation C and the research participants, and to review the background and history which sets the context for a detailed examination of the Council's experiences of diagnostic benchmarking. Nevertheless, a number of themes have begun to emerge from the data presented in this chapter, which are potentially important as elements of the research findings. At this stage, I wish to highlight the following emerging findings:

- ❑ An engagement with the crucial question of *what does excellence really mean?*, and a perception that, CPA "Excellence" designation notwithstanding, Organisation C has not yet achieved the level of "excellence" that it is striving for. In the participants' words: "...excellence doesn't mean perfection..."; "... We need to improve our key areas of performance... there's a lot that we need to build on..."; "...[we are] well on the approach to excellence as an organisation. Perhaps that has been measured to some extent by the Audit Commission's judgement that we are an 'Excellent Council'... that news to us was great, but we knew we are not an excellent organisation... we have got miles to go..."
- ❑ A belief that at Organisation C the notion that *people are our greatest asset* is more than just a hollow cliché: "... the staff are much more open to risk and change and trying new ways of doing things..."; "... there was a hard core of people... that felt '...we want to make the world a better place... and we're not going to give in' ... we needed those individuals to come to where we are today..."; "...it was a few individual people who were pushing and promoting this, and the same few individual people exist today..."; "We've been assessed as having ambitions, skills in prioritisation, focus, skills in learning..."; "It is about people, and it's about a cultural shift ..."
- ❑ Openness to and welcoming of external scrutiny (and a belief that we're quite unusual in this respect): "...if somebody asked me one thing why we thought we were excellent, it is because we know where we are poor, and we know how we can address that to put it right, and we have got the courage and conviction to talk about it openly, decide on

action and then work to deliver it.”; “I convinced the Board of Directors to volunteer to have the first inspection in the country... and the positive stuff that’s come from that has just been unbelievable.”; “[The Audit Commission said] ‘Well how is Organisation C like this, and yet... the majority of the rest of the country, don’t want to know?’”; “We’ll always bring in an independent assessor to tell us really what we already know, as reality check”; “... we will have to invent some sort of process for ourselves around self assessment, but also looking probably to bring in some form of external assessment and inspection, even if that is just to inform ourselves...”

- An apparent commitment to self assessment and diagnostic benchmarking, coupled with some doubt about whether good intentions have been fully followed-through: “We’ve trained something like forty people in the Business Excellence Model; personally I don’t see that we are getting the full benefit of that, because they are not being used.”

Chapter summary

This chapter has provided a thorough introduction to Organisation C, the Council which has been the focal point of my primary research; and to the individual research participants whose recollections, perceptions, opinions and interpretations provide much of the data that I am using to fulfil the aim of this research project. It has begun to present a summary of the data itself, and some interpretation of it. So far, the data presented has focused on the Council's current situation and status, including its designation as a "CPA Excellent Council"; and on the participants themselves and their memories of and reflections upon the way the Council used to be, the changes that have occurred, the "journey" that the Council has been on, and their perceptions of where it is up to on that journey. The chapter has highlighted some preliminary findings, which will be built upon as we proceed through the following chapters.

Chapter 6 Organisation C's experiences of diagnostic benchmarking

In this chapter, I will report and analyse Organisation C's extensive experience of improvement, self-assessment and diagnostic benchmarking, focusing particularly upon the Council's deployment of PROBE diagnostic benchmarking tools and the EFQM Excellence Model. This chapter will build upon the "scene setting" presented in the previous chapter, which has established some familiarity with Organisation C and with the research participants themselves. This chapter will examine in more detail the deployment of the tools and approaches that Organisation C has used in its efforts to improve and to achieve "excellence"- how they came to be deployed, in what specific contexts, at what times, with which people involved, with what results and effects. The chapter that follows this one will then focus in particular and in more depth on one specific deployment of the PROBE diagnostic benchmarking tool, as a means of "digging deeper" into the exploration of the effectiveness of diagnostic benchmarking as an enabler of organisational improvement.

This chapter is structured in the following sections:

- ❑ The process of diagnostic benchmarking using the PROBE tools
- ❑ Org. C's first experience of diagnostic benchmarking: Service PILOT, May 1997
- ❑ Service PROBE, August 1997
- ❑ Service PILOT and the Regional Excellence Award, 1998
- ❑ Service PROBE in the Directorate of Strategic Policy & Regeneration, June 2001
- ❑ Service PROBE in the Department of Housing, November 2002
- ❑ Service PROBE in the Directorate of Environmental Services, January 2003
- ❑ Organisation C's second entry for the Regional Excellence Award, 2004
- ❑ Organisation C's third entry for the Regional Excellence Award, 2005
- ❑ Reflections upon Organisation C's experiences of diagnostic benchmarking
- ❑ What difference has diagnostic benchmarking made at Organisation C?
- ❑ Plans for further deployments of diagnostic benchmarking at Organisation C
- ❑ Emerging findings
- ❑ Chapter summary

Organisation C has completed six separate diagnostic benchmarking processes using the PROBE tools, as detailed in Table 6.1.

TABLE 6.1: Completion of PROBE diagnostic benchmarks within Organisation C				
Date	PROBE tool	Scope	Team Leader	Facilitator
May 97	Service PILOT	Organisation C	Lee	Person AQ
August 97	Service PROBE	Organisation C	Person G	Person AP
August 98	Service PILOT	Organisation C	Lee	Person AQ
June 01	Service PROBE	Directorate of Strategic Policy & Regeneration	Bren	Morgan
November 02	Service PROBE	Department of Housing	Person A	Ali
January 03	Service PROBE	Directorate of Environmental Services	Person A	Ali

Additionally, Organisation C has made submissions on three occasions to the Regional Excellence Awards, on each occasion conducting a self-assessment using the EFQM Excellence Model as the basis for the submission document, and subsequently being assessed against the same model by an external team of assessors as part of the award scheme's judging process. The first of these submissions was made in 1998, the second in 2004 and the third in 2005. For the purposes of my research, I am treating these Excellence Model-based assessment processes as a variant of "diagnostic benchmarking" and will report and analyse them in this chapter alongside the PROBE-based benchmarking processes.

The process of diagnostic benchmarking using the PROBE tools

As background, I will set out an explanation of how an organisation deploys the PROBE tools, to supplement the explanation in Chapter 2 of how the Excellence Model is deployed. Organisation C has used two different versions of PROBE - the "full-blown" version called "Service PROBE"; and a simplified version called "Service PILOT." The two versions are based on similar principles, but the processes through which they are used are different.

Ali was the facilitator for Organisation C's Service PROBE in the Department of Housing in 2002, and in the Directorate of Environmental Services in 2003. Ali has also been "pencilled in" to facilitate the Service PROBE which will be part of Organisation C's Best Value Review of "Support Services". In the context of this planned PROBE, Ali describes the process that (s)he expects the PROBE team to complete, which begins, for Ali, with receipt of a notification from the PROBE scheme coordinator that the client organisation wants to proceed. Ali then contacts the PROBE team leader for a telephone briefing, clarifying that (s)he expects that the team members will have done some preparation in advance of the "PROBE day":

My guess would be, from previous experience, that at least the team members will have gone through the questionnaire... if somebody has completed the questionnaire but can't make it on the day... then somebody else often takes the 'ownership' of presenting their results... if anybody spent the time to answer all those questions and put a few comments in the comments boxes, I think we've every right to take their comments on board... And it could happen... that one or two have talked to colleagues, so they may be presenting not just their own views but the considered view of a few other people in their area.

The "questionnaire" that forms the focus for these deliberations consists of ninety one "scales" in the format illustrated by four examples in Figure 6.1; and Figure 6.2 reproduces the instructions that explain how the questionnaire should be "scored". Table 6.2 lists the titles of all 91 scales that comprise the Service PROBE questionnaire (with the four examples shown in Figure 6.1 highlighted **in bold** in Table 6.2).

Figure 6.1: Four example "questions" (or "scales") from the "Service PROBE" questionnaire

	1	2	3	4	5	score
Management style	Managers autocratic with little cross-functional communications		Flat organisation: teamwork encouraged		Managers as leaders. Extensive employee empowerment and participation	
Guidance notes: What is the role of the organisation's leadership in communicating and reinforcing clear values and high performance orientation? Does this include developing a service culture throughout the organisation? How visible are senior management in promoting this? To what degree is a service culture promoted, not just at the customer contact, but throughout the whole organisation?						
Problem solving	Crisis mindset, finger pointing		System for identifying and responding to problems, using process analysis and teams		Problems viewed as opportunities for further improvement, and all staff empowered to act	
Guidance notes: How are problems treated? Is there a team approach to identifying causes and developing solutions, as opposed to escalation to management? Are employees or individuals penalised when problems arise, or is there a belief that procedures are at fault and may need revision to become 'fail-safe'? What training is given to employees to enable them to solve problems? Is there a desire to learn from problems or just the application of a quick fix?						
Overall productivity within organisation	Decreasing		Moderate improvement		Consistently improving. Significant gains	
Guidance notes: Use a year-on-year assessment of productivity gains. How is productivity measured - output per head? Return on capital employed? What has been the key contributor to date? How is progress going to be maintained in the future?						
Level of customer satisfaction	Customer expectation often not met. Some customer complaints		Little customer dissatisfaction. Expectations met, but rarely exceeded		Many delighted customers. Customers will enthusiastically recommend the service to others. Expectations are often exceeded	
Guidance notes: What is considered to be a good level of customer satisfaction and how is it defined? A delighted customer is one who will remain loyal to the organisation and willingly recommend your service to others. What proportion of your customers fit this definition?						

Figure 6.2: "How to score" instructions from the "Service PROBE" questionnaire

The Service PROBE questionnaire

How to fill in the questionnaire

The Service PROBE questionnaire starts on the following pages. Each right-hand page asks you about a particular area of your company, for example *Service quality*. Within each of these areas there are a number of questions about aspects of that particular area: for example, one of the aspects within Service quality is *reliability*. Within each of these questions are statements: you have to choose the statement most appropriate to your organisation/site. Each statement gives you a score to be written in the box provided.

Underneath each question there are notes giving a more detailed explanation. There are a few lines beside each note for you to write your own responses or thoughts.

How to score

You choose the statement most appropriate to your organisation/site and this gives you a score – the number in the band at the top of the page. Sometimes you may feel that your organisation is between two statements. In this case you choose the number in the band between the two statements. In the example below, the organisation questioned felt that statement b was most appropriate to them so they scored three. If they felt they were between statement a and b, they would have scored two.

	1	2	3	4	5	score
Statement b is most appropriate to our organisation, so we score three	statement a		statement b		statement c	3

If you see differences across the organisation, where some areas are more advanced than others, it is best to assess an average position. For example, a pilot implementation does not warrant the maximum score of five.

We seek to assess the position of your organisation *today*, not where it will be when current plans and projects deliver the results you expect. Benchmarking will only ever be of value if assessments are true reflections of the practices and performance of the organisation as it is *now*.

TABLE 6.2: The 91 "scales" that comprise the "Service PROBE" questionnaire

Organisation and culture: drivers		Service delivery: drivers	
1	Role of leadership in developing service culture	47	Management of customer loyalty
2	Management style	48	Mgt. involvement in quality leadership
3	Shared vision, mission and goals	49	Continuous improvement
4	Customer orientation	50	Collection and use of data on quality
5	Employee attitude	51	Problem solving
6	Quality values	52	Quality mindset
7	Openness within the organisation	53	Quality procedures and framework
8	Relationship building	54	Service guarantees and warranties
9	Recognition and reward	55	'Real-time' staff handling problems
10	Management reward	56	Problem handling strat'y for serv. recovery
11	Skill & job training and education	57	Use of customer complaint data
12	Education and training for quality	58	Complaint handling procedures
13	Learning organisation	59	Employee discretion
14	Employee involvement	60	Workforce flexibility
15	Day-to-day teamwork	Service delivery: results	
16	Listening to staff	61	Reliability
17	Attention to employee loyalty	62	Quality performance, relative to industry
18	Support for employees	63	Staff responsiveness
19	Measurement of employee satisfaction	64	Courtesy
Organisation and culture: results		65	Accessibility
20	Employee loyalty relative to industry	66	Impact on society
21	Employee satisfaction	67	Service tangibles
Service concept & processes: drivers		Service value & measurement: drivers	
22	Listening to the customer	68	Focus on employee productivity
23	Understanding markets	69	Elimination of 'waste'
24	Value	70	Value for money
25	Competitive positioning	71	Established service standards
26	Customer input for new & existing services and products	72	Visibility and communication of service standards
27	Strategic role of innovation	73	Challenging standards
28	Organisational structure for service & product development	74	Clarity of goals
29	Innovative environment	75	Mgt. attention to quality measures
30	New service design & devpt. process	76	Benchmarks
31	Role of back office/support functions	77	Performance measurement and reporting
32	Management of business processes	78	Customer satisfaction measurement
33	Customer relations	Service value & measurement: results	
34	Current use of IT	79	Level of customer satisfaction
35	Managing 'moments of truth'	80	Trends in customer satisfaction
36	Electronic commerce	81	Value (quality/price)
37	IT integration	82	Customer retention
38	IT as a basis for knowledge mgt.	83	Customer base
39	Supplier relationship and stability	84	Margins, relative to industry
40	Influencing suppliers of workforce	85	Market share
41	Outsourcing	86	Cashflow
42	Innovativeness	87	Overall productv'ty within organisation
43	Clarity of service concept	88	Return on net assets
44	Speed of devpt., relative to competition	89	Operating costs
45	Service meeting customer needs	90	Overall productivity, relative to industry
46	Distinctiveness of service	91	Prices

The description of the recommended process that is sent to client organisations in advance suggests that the team should meet for a preparatory discussion, after the individual team members have familiarised themselves with the questionnaire and given some initial thought to the scores they would assign to the various questions, and in advance of the PROBE day itself. Ali's experience across a wide range of organisations is that the teams do not always complete such a preparatory discussion in advance of the PROBE day:

Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't... My experience in general is that it is becoming less likely... But it is also my experience that those who have seem to be better placed in the facilitation session... in terms of arguing their corner... and highlighting for the facilitator those areas where they are having difficulties... which means that you can spend the time on those and not waste time on things where there aren't any issues.

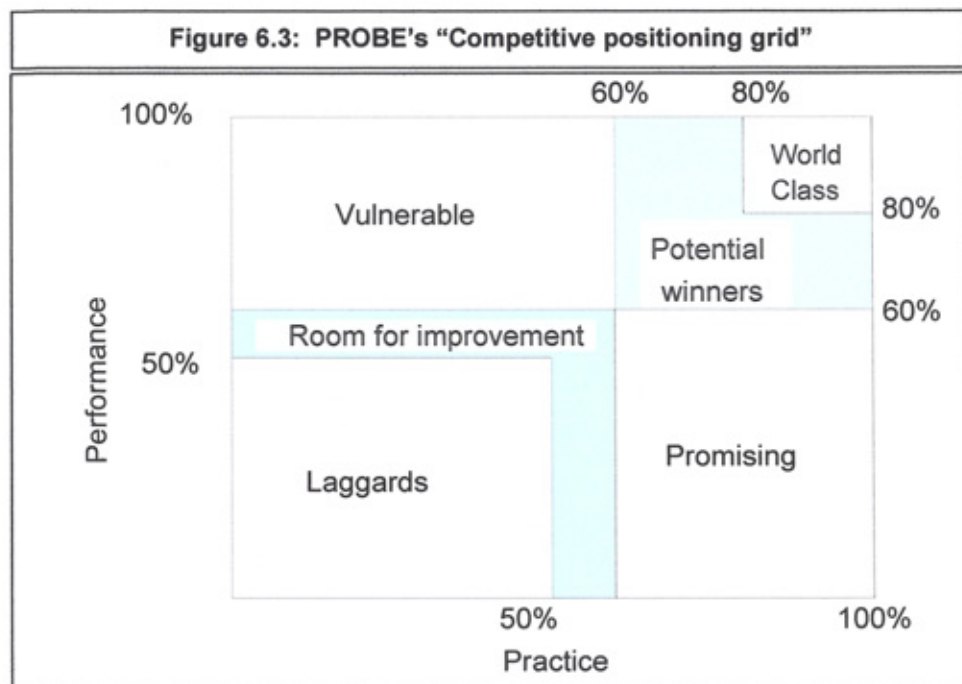
Ali and Morgan have provided accounts of facilitating a "PROBE day", which follows a standard pattern. The facilitator invites the team, which typically has 8 to 10 members, to discuss the questions, one after another, and agree a score (which can be 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5) for each of the 91 "scales". The facilitator will listen to and facilitate the discussions, ensuring that all voices are heard and that the recorded scores are truly representative of the views of the team members. (S)he will also judge when it is right to challenge a statement or a score, and when it is right to move the discussion along for the sake of time management and prioritisation of the discussion points that merit the most attention. The process of working through the questionnaire typically consumes the whole morning and an hour or two of the afternoon. Morgan summarises his/her experience of the process:

...when a facilitator starts off, they usually give a bit of background about the maths and the protocols, how it's about where you are at today - you might be introducing a new ERP system tomorrow, but it's not tomorrow, it's today! And you tell them that they're not going to be reprimanded by any senior person - whatever is said within the meeting room is said, and everybody accepts it; it might be right, it might be wrong, but by constructive debating and discussion you arrive at a consensus. And generally you find that somebody knows a lot about a particular area... But there will be areas where they think they know, but somebody from that area goes, 'Oh well, actually, this and this happens.' And, 'Oh I didn't realise that...', so they modify it...

Once the team has finalised its agreed scores, the team members take a break while the facilitator inputs those scores to database software. This process takes about 45 minutes, including thinking time for the facilitator. The team reassembles, and the facilitator presents graphs comparing the team's PROBE scores, in various combinations, with equivalent scores recorded by other organisations. The facilitator can display average scores for particular sectors, so that Organisation C, for example, can compare their scores to an average for "Public Service Organisations." It is normal for the graphs to stimulate discussion about how these results could be interpreted, about their implications, or about actions that might be taken in response to them.

The PROBE day is normally a fairly full day, in Ali's experience: "...typically 9:30 am arrive for a 10:00 am start, and usually through and away by 4:30-ish, having presented the results back." Subsequently, the facilitator produces a written report, incorporating the feedback graphs and adding words of interpretation and reflection, and sends it to the team leader. In some cases, the facilitator returns to the organisation some weeks later for a follow-up "Action Planning Session" - depending on whether the client organisation chooses to take up (and, normally, pay for) this option.

The "headline" graph in PROBE feedback is based on a "competitive positioning grid", shown in Figure 6.3. The organisation's "overall practice" and "overall performance" scores are mapped onto this grid, placing the organisation in one of six categories. To be labeled as "world class", the practice and performance scores must both exceed 80% of the maximum possible. Lower scores place the organisation in the "potential winners" category (sometimes referred to as "contenders"); or "room for improvement" (or, less euphemistically, "weak"); or one of three other categories. The feedback report features a "scattergram" chart identifying the organisation's position on this grid, and the positions of other organisations in the PROBE database. The feedback is then developed in greater detail through up to ten additional graphs identifying the organisation's scores for a series of indices, and comparing them with equivalent scores for other organisations in the chosen peer group and/or in the database as a whole.



Service PILOT was designed as a less sophisticated and less time-consuming version of PROBE, intended for use as an introductory diagnostic benchmarking tool, enabling people and organisations to try the process out with a relatively low commitment of time and expense. It could be used as a stand-alone tool for use by an individual or team, or as the focus for an "Introduction to benchmarking" workshop - it was through attending such a workshop that Lee first discovered and used Service PILOT in 1997. Service PILOT²⁴ delivered a simplified version of the graphical feedback generated by Service PROBE.

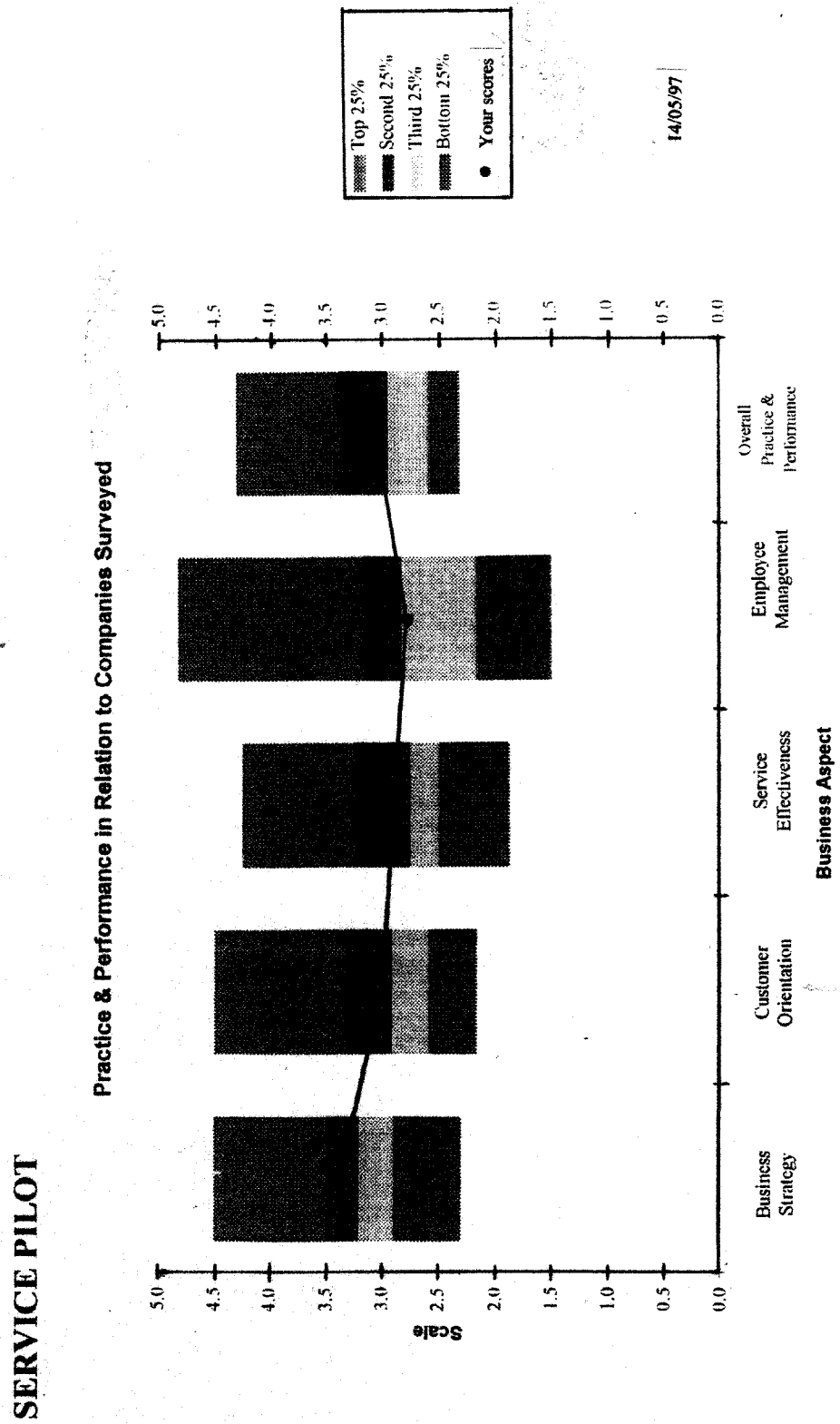
²⁴ "Service PILOT" was available as part of the "PROBE" suite of benchmarking tools between 1996 and 2000, when it was replaced by a new PROBE variant known as "INTROSCOPE". Hence my use of the past tense in describing "PILOT".

Organisation C's first experience of diagnostic benchmarking: Service PILOT, May 1997

The Council's first experience of diagnostic benchmarking occurred when Lee attended an "Introduction to benchmarking" workshop hosted by a local University as part of a regional "competitiveness project." Lee found him/herself sharing this experience with ten people from a diverse range of organisations from the private and not-for-profit sectors. The workshop provided an introduction to the concepts and practicalities of "benchmarking", a subject which at the time was being quite heavily promoted both nationally and regionally. Lee had more experience than most attending the workshop, having been involved in several "process benchmarking" exercises and common interest groups, and having experience of the EFQM Excellence Model. However, the practicalities of "diagnostic benchmarking" as such were new to Lee. The workshop explained the availability of the "PROBE" benchmarking tools, which were being offered free within the region as part of the competitiveness project (they would normally have cost approximately £1,000), and demonstrated examples of how they worked and their intended benefits and outputs. Workshop delegates were invited to complete "PILOT", as a simple benchmark in its own right and as a "taster" of the "full-blown" PROBE process. Lee received feedback in the form shown in Figure 6.4, comparing Organisation C to a regional sample of "service" (as opposed to "manufacturing") organisations, and suggesting that Organisation C:

- Was in the "second quartile" for "business strategy", scoring 3.4 out of 5 and falling just short of being in the "first" (top) quartile
- Was low in the second quartile for "customer orientation", "service effectiveness" and "overall practice and performance", scoring about 3 out of 5 in each case
- Was in the third quartile for "employee management", scoring 2.8 out of 5.

Figure 6.4: Service PILOT feedback for Organisation C: May 1997



Lee took from the workshop the message that PILOT had illustrated a potentially useful benchmarking process, and that the more sophisticated "Service PROBE" was available to try. (S)he suggested this to colleagues. Person G, one of the three Directors of the Council, shared Lee's enthusiasm and asked Lee to assemble a team. The eight people chosen were already working together as the newly-formed "Corporate Strategy Unit".

Service PROBE, August 1997

Person G led that first PROBE team. The scope of the benchmark was the practices and performance of the Council as a whole. Lee, a team member, recalls the background:

...we had a 'Triumvirate' arrangement with three Executive Directors. It was like the Emperor's New Clothes - everyone knew it wasn't working, but they insisted that it was and that they didn't need a Chief Executive. We thought we'd use PROBE as an early activity for the new Corporate Strategy Unit to demonstrate that the work it could do was worthwhile and could work corporately... The Corporate Strategy Unit has had several different names in its lifetime, the latest being 'Corporate Development Unit'. At that time it was based around a group of four or five people who wanted to make a change. They were volunteers, people who wanted to take the organisation forward. You might say that we used PROBE to promote something against some competition internally within the directorates, within the Executive Directors. The outcome was that it worked, and the Corporate Development Unit is... still alive in 2004.

Interviewer: And you would attribute some of that to the use of PROBE, would you?

Definitely. We demonstrated that we could deliver what most other Corporate Strategy Units would provide, in other local authorities. The questions in PROBE answered most of the questions that the Executive Directors wanted to hear more about. And because it was led by an independent facilitator, it gained recognition and acceptance. Another outcome was that completing PROBE made the Director (Person G) focus on the task of creating an 'organisational development strategy', and the feedback from PROBE helped to determine what should be in it. (S)he asked me to work it up in the format of a jigsaw, which I did. In hindsight, that piece of work was well ahead of its time.

The O. D. strategy had the following headings:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Key policies | <input type="checkbox"/> Partnerships/benchmarking |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Corporate processes/procedures | <input type="checkbox"/> Performance management framework |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Improvement programme | <input type="checkbox"/> Evaluation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Employee involvement | <input type="checkbox"/> Public involvement protocol |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Corporate training | <input type="checkbox"/> Corporate service concept and design |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Corporate organisational development budget | |

The detailed content included a number of initiatives which, Lee recalls, were progressed in the following months but were not initially successful - such as neuro linguistic programming, and 360° appraisal - but which were eventually successfully implemented some years later; hence Lee's comment that the strategy was "ahead of its time". The feedback received via the PROBE feedback report is summarised in Table 6.3 and Figures 6.5 - 6.7. It was more detailed than that received through PILOT a few months earlier, with different comparison group; so the two sets of feedback were not easy to compare "like-for-like." PILOT had indicated that Organisation C was "better than average" (for a regional sample of service-provider organisations) in several areas, particularly "Business Strategy"; but "Employee Management" was a relative weakness. PROBE suggested that Organisation C lagged the average (for UK public service organisations) in all areas. Three areas were highlighted where Organisation C's scores lagged the sector average by only a small margin:

- ☐ Service delivery processes
- ☐ Service recovery
- ☐ Business performance

Organisation C lagged by the greatest margin in:

- ☐ Employee loyalty and morale
- ☐ Service design
- ☐ Service effectiveness

TABLE 6.3: Summary of feedback from the PROBE diagnostic benchmark of Organisation C in August 1997

Overall PROBE scores	<u>Organisation C</u> Practice 54% Performance 55%	<u>Comparison group (UK public service organisations)</u> Practice 65% Performance 67%
STRENGTHS: Identified areas in which Organisation C appears to lead relative to comparison group	<p>This PROBE benchmark identified no areas in which Organisation C appeared to lead relative to the comparison group.</p> <p>Three areas were identified in which Organisation C lagged the comparison group only by a small margin (i.e. these are areas of relative strength):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service delivery processes • Service recovery • Business performance 	
AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT: Identified areas in which Organisation C appears to lag relative to comparison group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employee loyalty and morale • Service design • Service effectiveness • Performance measurement • Service culture • Service standards 	
Extracts from narrative of feedback report	<p>"[The Overall scores] place the organisation in the category 'Room for improvement', and these scores are somewhat lower than the average for public service organisations."</p> <p>"It is worth noting that the database contains some of the leading service organisations in the UK, measuring practices and performance against World Class comparators. These are very stringent standards, and [Organisation C's]... position on the graphs, which might at first sight seem rather disappointing, should be interpreted in this context."</p>	

Figure 6.5: Service PROBE feedback for Organisation C in August 1997: "Scattergram"

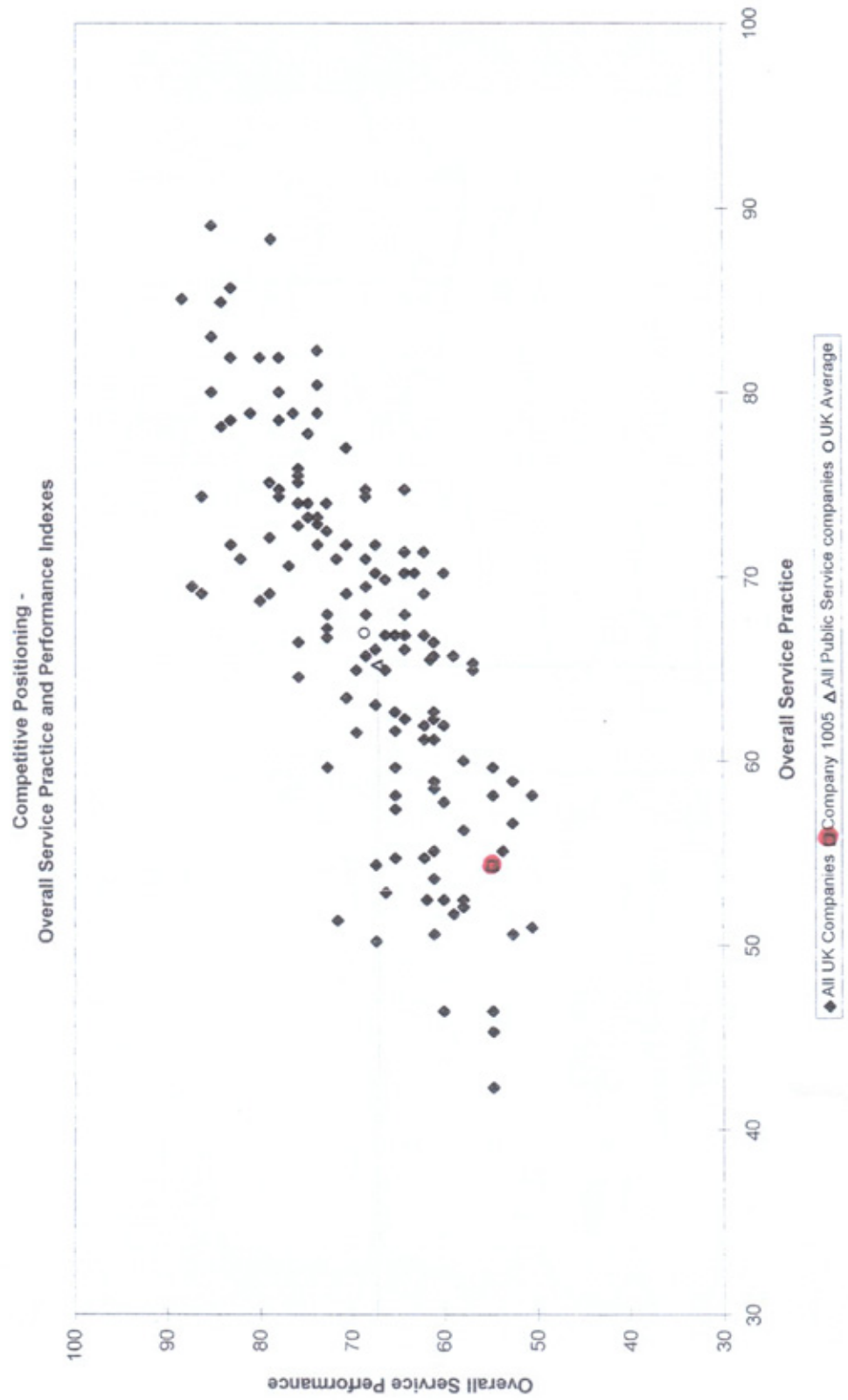


Figure 6.6: Service PROBE feedback for Organisation C in August 1997: "High level quartiles chart"

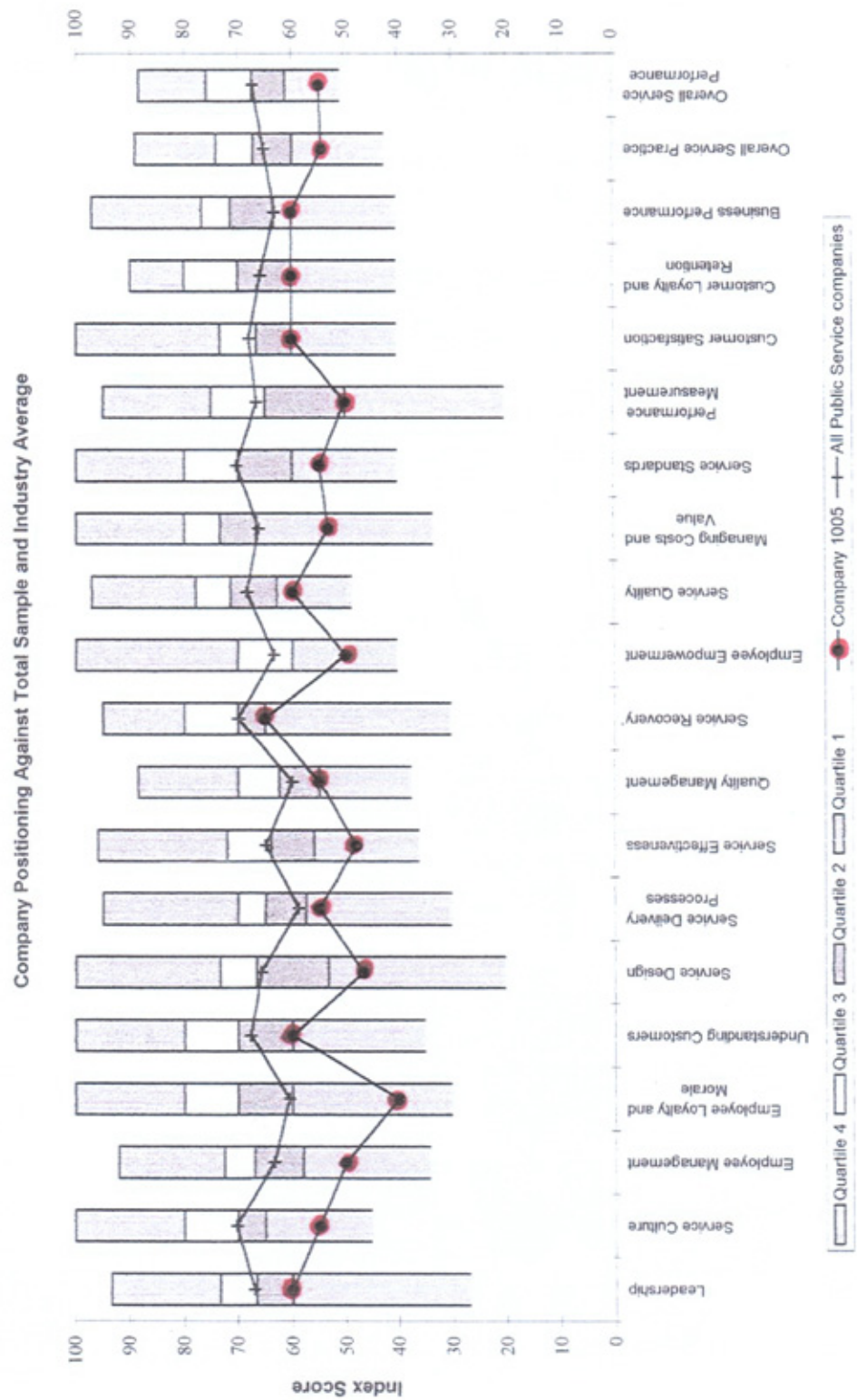
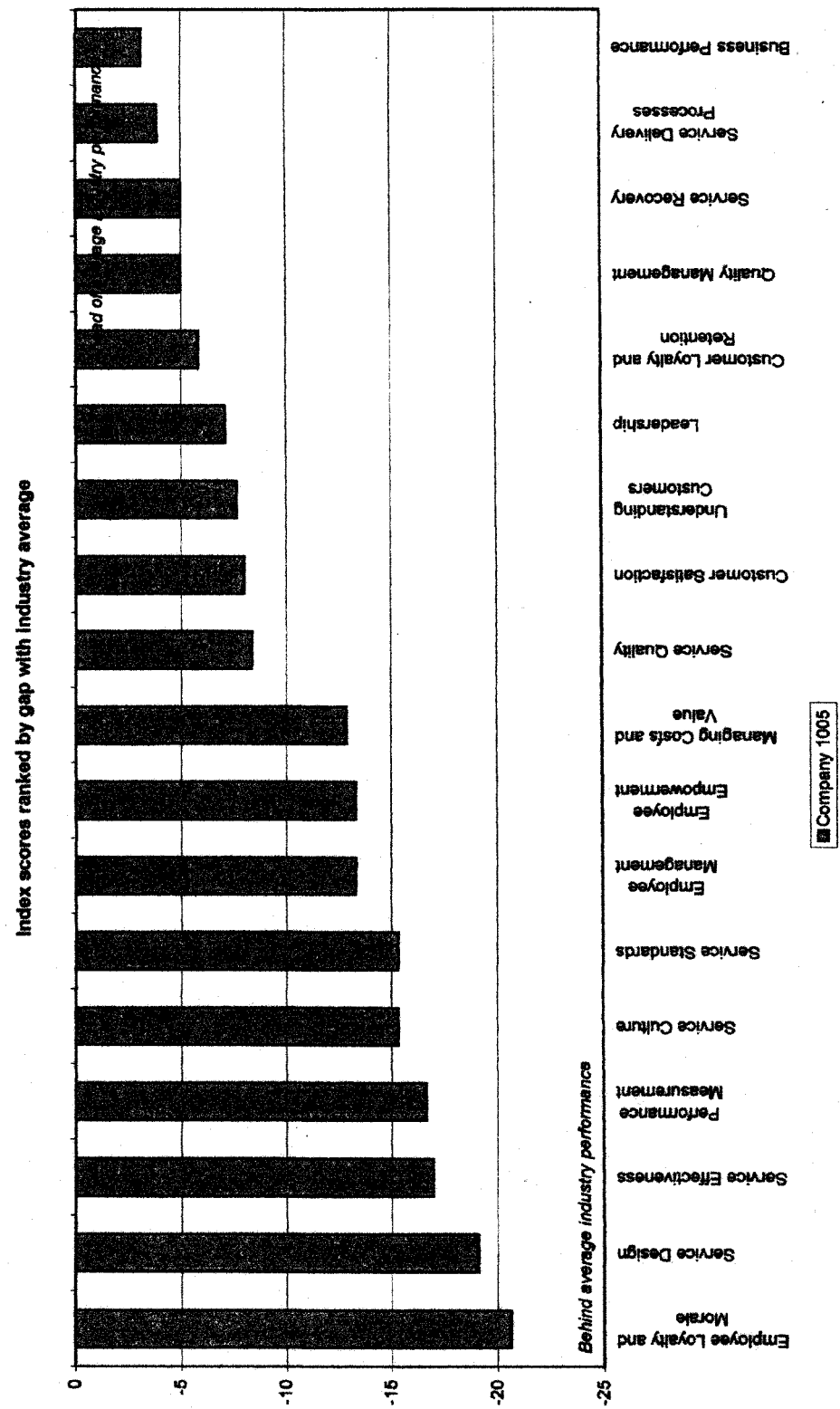


Figure 6.7: Service PROBE feedback for Organisation C in August 1997: "Indices gap chart"



Service PILOT and the Regional Excellence Award, 1998

Lee recalls Organisation C's next experience of diagnostic benchmarking:

...we used PILOT, and looked at the whole Council again. I believe we proved we'd moved forward as an organisation. We used it as part of two Business Excellence submissions, to demonstrate year on year achievement and continuous improvement. We entered a Government scheme... the 'Quality Task Force', set up by the Cabinet Office to promote the Excellence Model within local government. They said that leading edge authorities of the future should be looking at things like the Excellence Model, Charter Mark, IiP, balanced scorecard... we also we put a submission in for the Regional Quality Award.

Lee and colleagues have been unable to provide a record of this PILOT, or of the Excellence Model submissions and feedback from 1998. Two research participants who were involved at the time recall that Person G was "very disappointed" with the Excellence Model-based feedback, which they believe awarded Organisation C a score below 200 points (out of 1,000), and feared that it might reflect badly on him/herself and colleagues. They suspect that the paperwork was never widely distributed.

To put this score into context, Lee, who has substantial experience as an assessor for the Regional Excellence Awards, believes that winners of a regional award would generally be expected to score more than 400 points, and that winners of the UK and European Award are likely to be scoring over 600, perhaps even 650 or 700 points.

Service PROBE in the Directorate of Strategic Policy & Regeneration, June 2001

There was a three year gap until the next time Organisation C used PROBE. Lee explains:

...around '99 or 2000, the Best Value legislation arrived, we were going down the route of trying to promote Business Excellence. It didn't go down too well. So we decided to write something called the '72 Step Process', based on the Excellence Model, as a mechanism to go through our Best Value Reviews of different services. We went through the first review and it was really a learning curve, about the legislation and about how we're going to do this - for the first time ever the Government is saying, 'You've got freedoms and flexibilities, prove to us that you're a good organisation, but we won't tell you how to do it.' So it's non-prescriptive. That, for a local authority - certainly the position we were in - was quite frightening to do... we went through the Best Value Review for 'Revenues and Benefits' - we volunteered as a guinea pig. We didn't use PROBE - we brought in a team of consultants to help us market test whether the service was competitive. As a result of the fact that we developed the 72 Step Process at the end of that review, we decided we didn't need external consultants, from here on we could do it ourselves. The next one was the Best Value Review of 'Regeneration'. There are four elements within Best Value: 'Challenge, Compare, Consult and Compete'; and when we looked at the 'Challenge' element we thought, 'We've used PROBE in the past, let's use it again.' We convinced the Lead Officer [Bren] to focus on PROBE as a good benchmarking tool, and (s)he agreed, and was quite taken by the tool. It also went down very well with the Best Value Inspectors.

The June 2001 feedback is summarised in Table 6.4 and Figures 6.8 - 6.14. The scores for Overall Practice and Performance (70% and 72% respectively) were considerably higher than those of the August 1997 PROBE (54% and 55%). This could have been regarded as an indication of Organisation C's progress; but, of course, the 2001 PROBE had a narrower scope, so a direct comparison might not be meaningful. A number of strengths were highlighted, none of which had been identified as a (relative) strength of Organisation C as a whole by the 1997 PROBE. They included "continuous improvement", lending some credence to the suggestion that, at least within this Directorate, Organisation C had made some progress in developing a culture of improvement; although this positive indicator was somewhat countered by the fact that "cycle of virtue" was identified as an area for

improvement. The PROBE feedback report included explanatory notes for each of the indices, including the following:

Continuous improvement index:

- ❑ Focuses on the continuous improvement of processes. Quality problems are addressed and employees frequently use a wide range of quality tools
- ❑ Organisations that are committed to continuous improvement also emphasise the quality training and education of their employees
- ❑ This in turn is supported by quality procedures and use of models such as the EFQM Model of business excellence.

Cycle of Virtue index:

- ❑ This is a set of three activities each of which mutually reinforces the other. The first is job training and education. There is a strong focus and resource invested in developing the skills for the employees
- ❑ This is then supported by employee involvement, for example in improvement programmes
- ❑ This is reinforced by recognition and reward of exceptional performance, in both front and back office. This in turn leads to motivated and retained employees allowing training to focus on continuing skill development raising the overall standards within the organisation.

Table 6.4: Summary of feedback from the PROBE diagnostic benchmark of Directorate of Strategic Policy and Regeneration in June 2001

Overall PROBE scores	<u>Organisation C</u> Practice 70% Performance 72%	<u>Comparison group (Public Service organisations)</u> Practice 64% Performance 66%
STRENGTHS: Identified areas in which Organisation C appears to lead relative to comparison group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationship marketing Innovativeness as an organisation Service standards Value orientation Continuous improvement ("kaizen") 	
AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT: Identified areas in which Organisation C appears to lag relative to comparison group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> eBusiness Cycle of virtue (training & education; employee involvement; recognition & rewards) Customer growth 	
Extracts from narrative of feedback report	<p>"[The] Council is committed to maintaining corporate registration of its ISO9000 quality management system and has continued to maintain corporate recognition of Investors in People. [2 named departments] both hold Charter Marks and 2 further Service Departments will submit applications during 2001-2002... In undertaking its Best Value Reviews and plans to support the drive for continuous improvement across the authority, the Council has committed to the effective use of the [EFQM] Excellence Model. It has trained more that 20 licensed assessors and has become actively involved in the regional award process... [The Council] was a finalist in the [Regional] Excellence Awards for the year 2000. It plans to pursue a route of excellence through to regional and national award winning level."</p> <p>"[The scores for Overall Practice and Overall Performance] position the Directorate in the top 20% of the overall sample and the top 16% of Public Service organisations benchmarked in this way."</p> <p>"Some organisations tend to be optimistic in their perception of their level of inherent 'excellence.' There was no such problem [here]. The team was very realistic in scoring each index. In fact, it must be recorded that in many instances, the superior scoring from the most senior member involved was not allowed to affect the consensus score. The whole team strived to agree a consensus on every index and felt that by doing so, a fair overall benchmarking result would be reflected. The facilitator compliments the team for this... sincerely!"</p>	

Figure 6.8: Service PROBE feedback for Directorate of Strategic Policy and Regeneration in June 2001: "Scattergram"

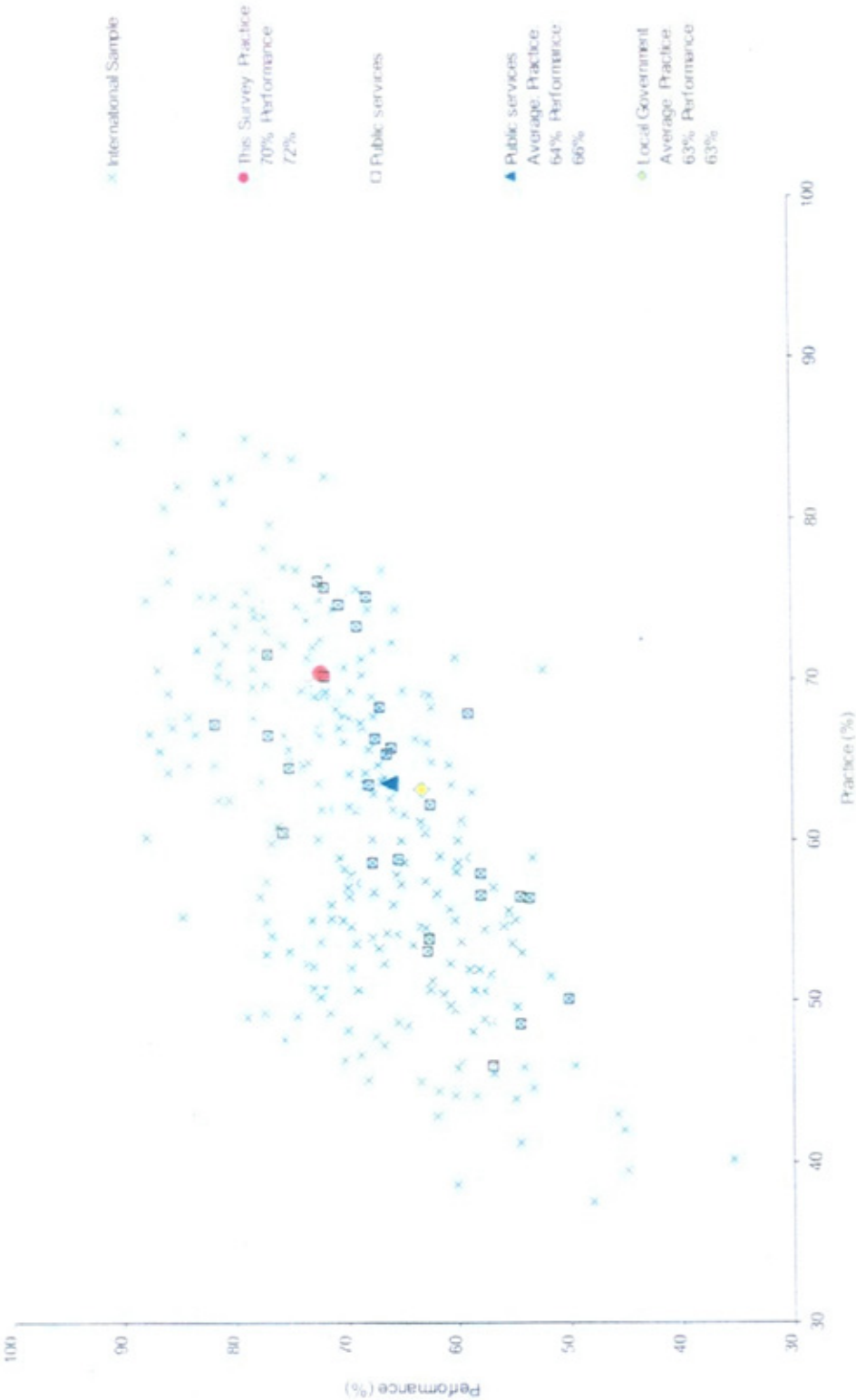


Figure 6.9: PROBE feedback for Directorate of Strategic Policy & Regeneration: "Business Leadership" quartiles chart

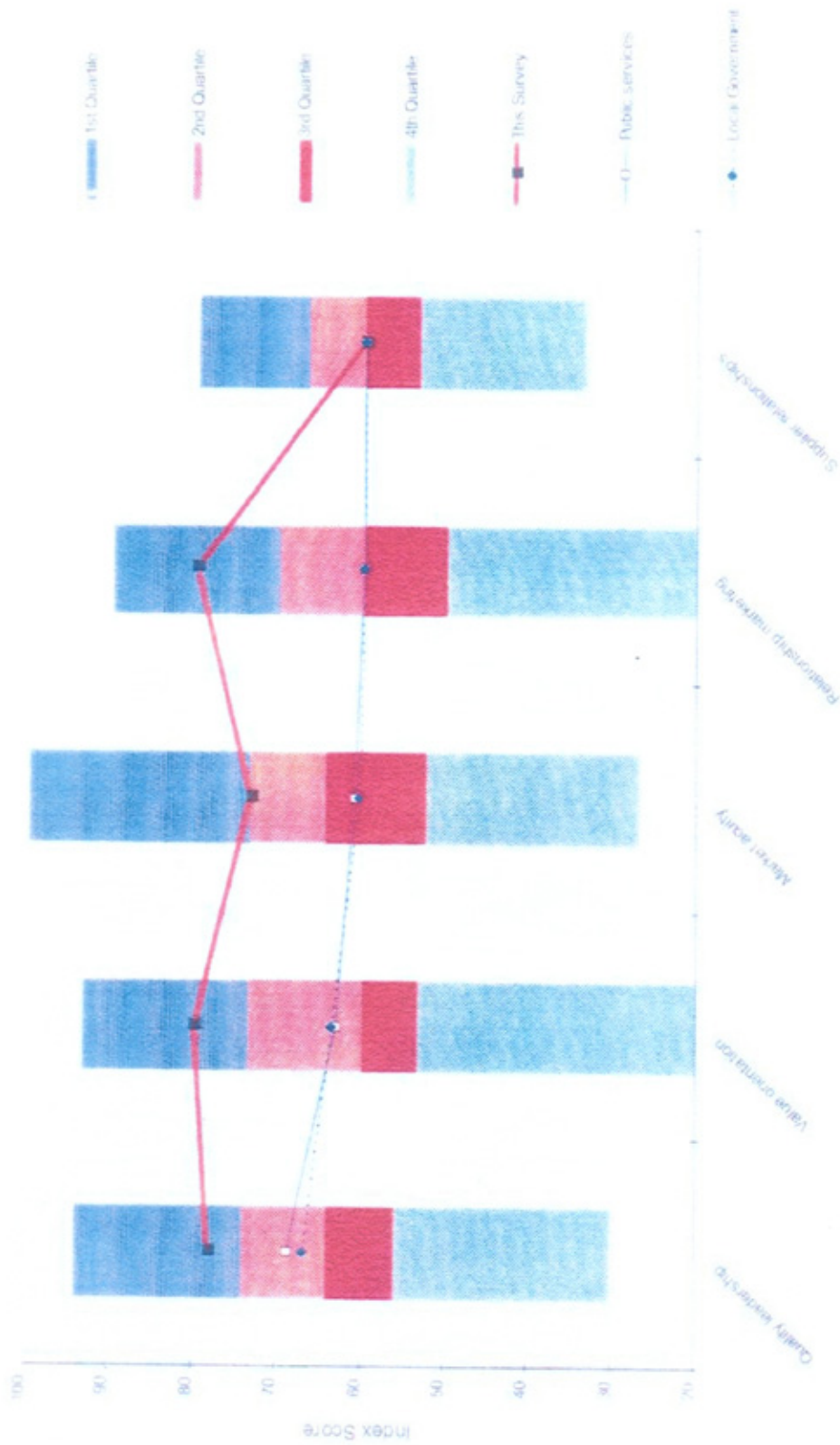


Figure 6.10: PROBE feedback for Directorate of Strategic Policy & Regeneration: "Service Processes" quartiles chart

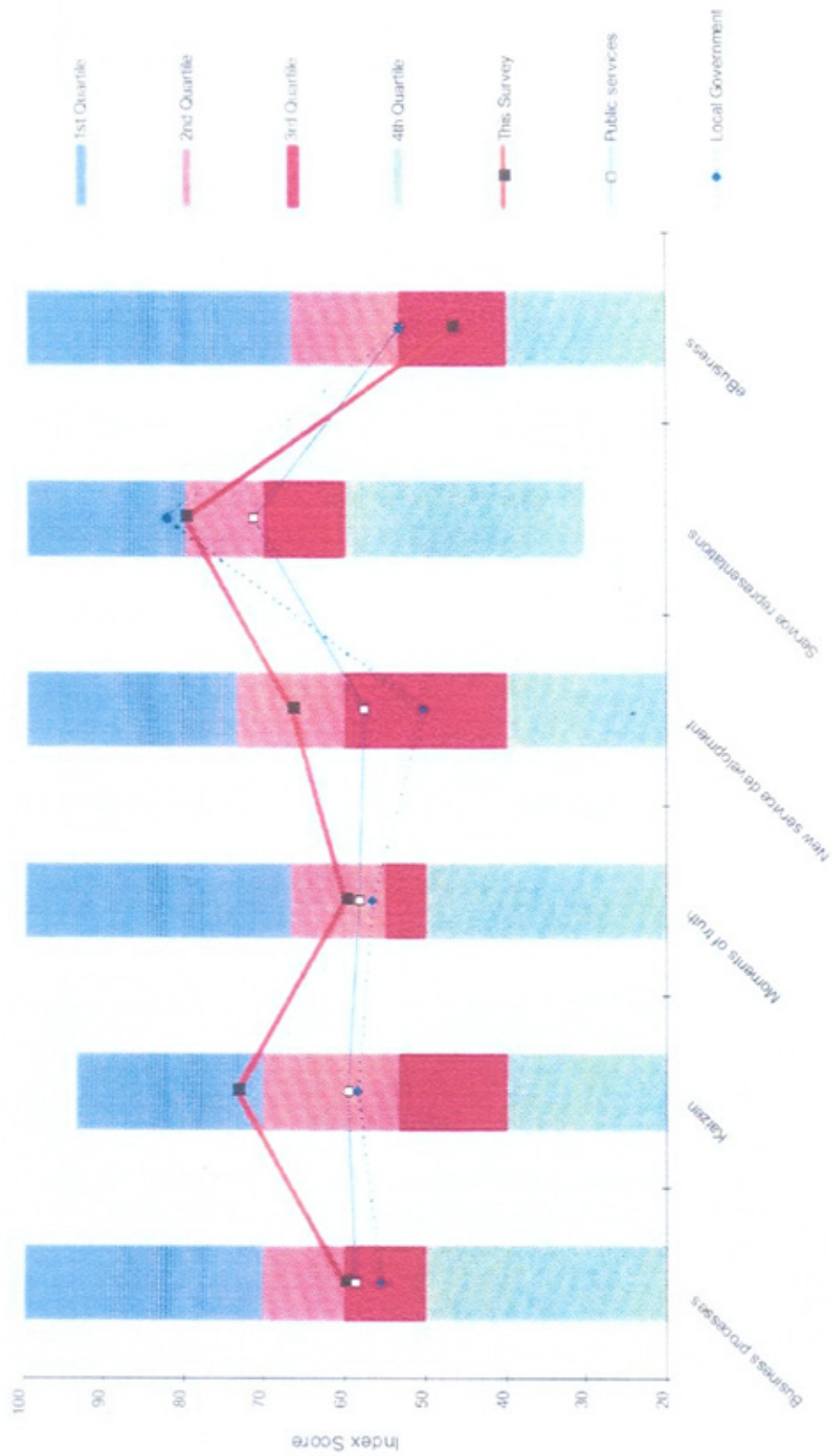


Figure 6.11: PROBE feedback for Directorate of Strategic Policy & Regeneration: "People" quartiles chart

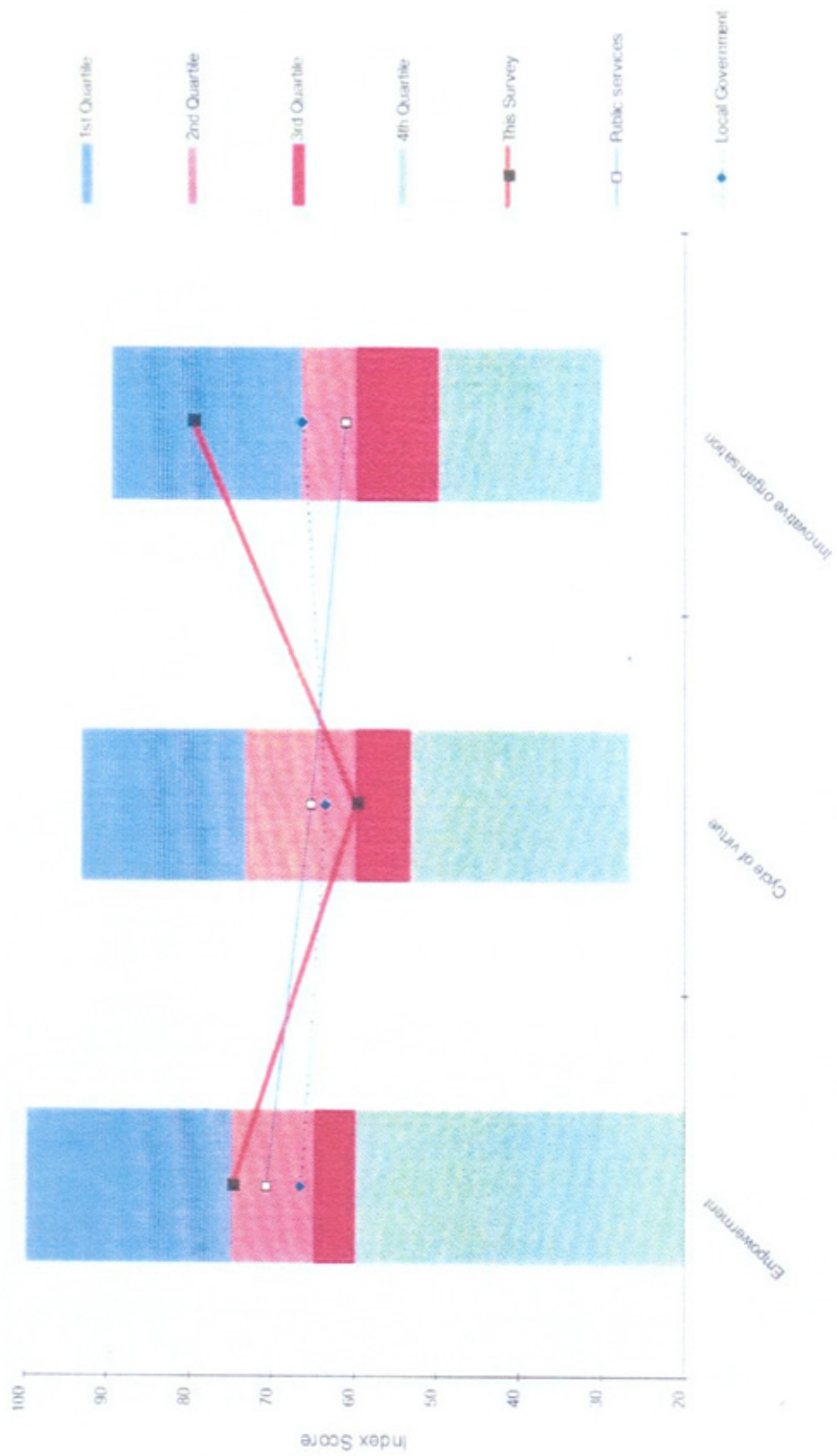


Figure 6.12: PROBE feedback for Directorate of Strategic Policy & Regeneration: "Performance Management" quartiles chart

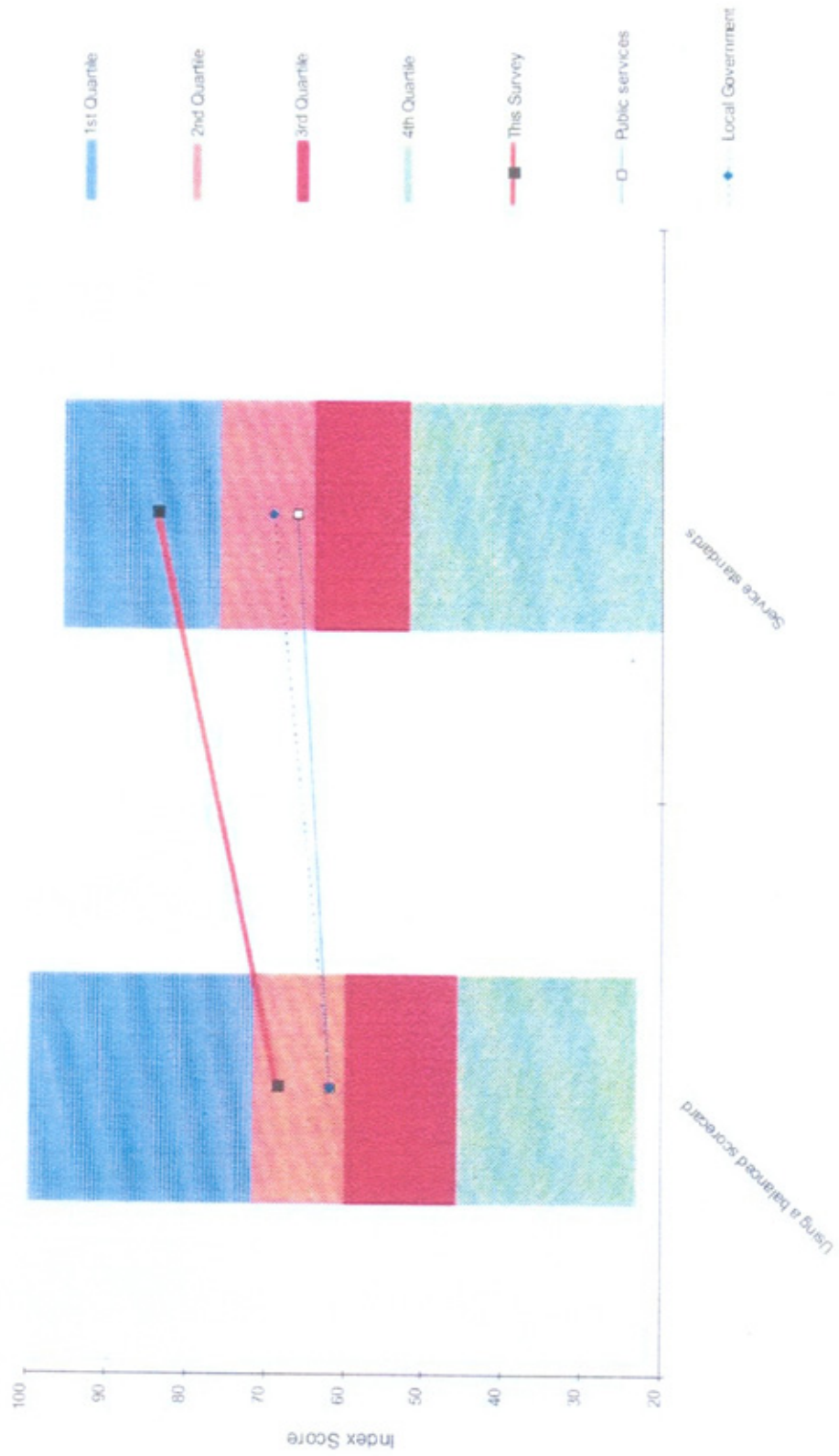


Figure 6.13: PROBE feedback for Directorate of Strategic Policy & Regeneration: "Results" quartiles chart

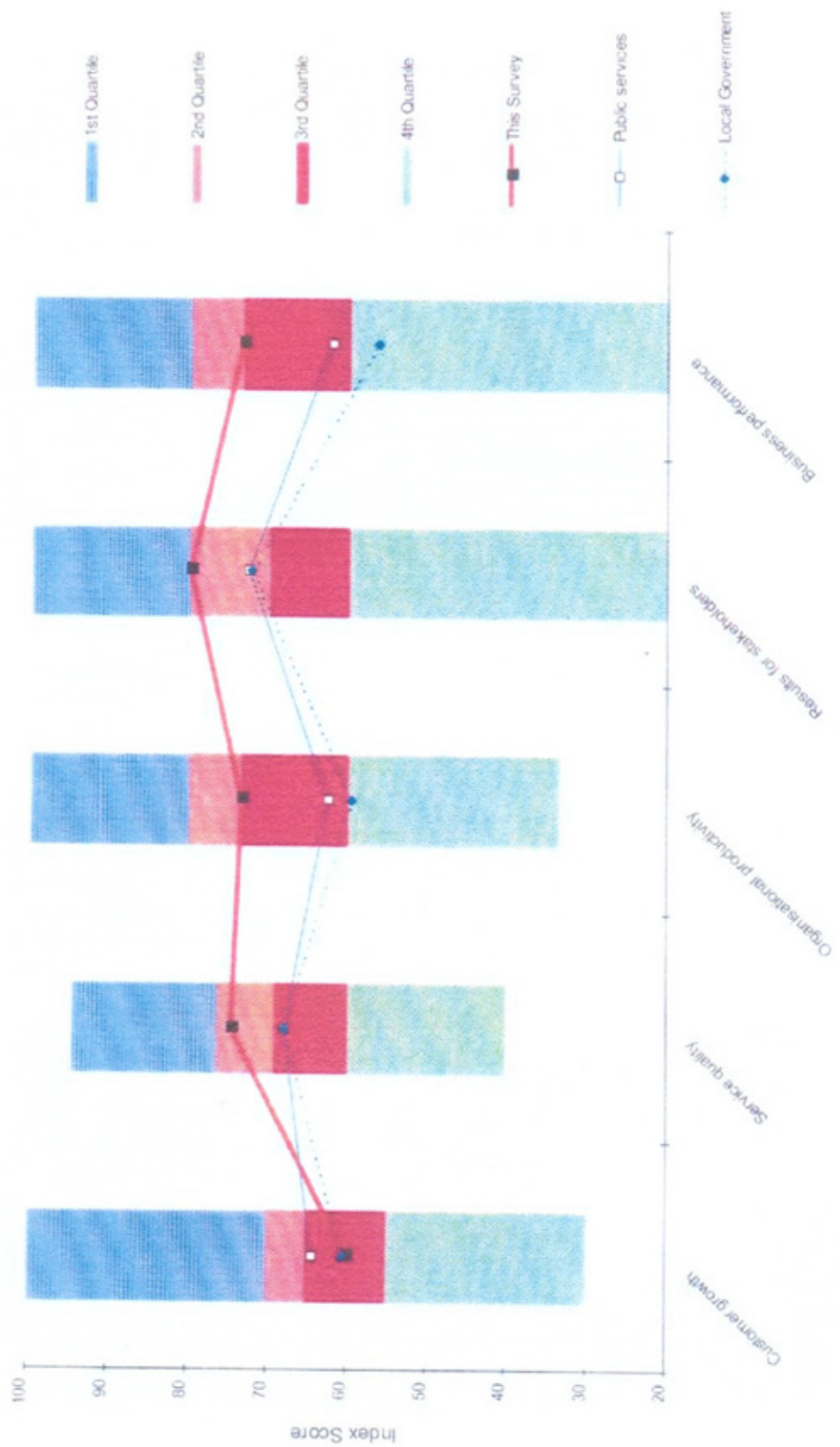
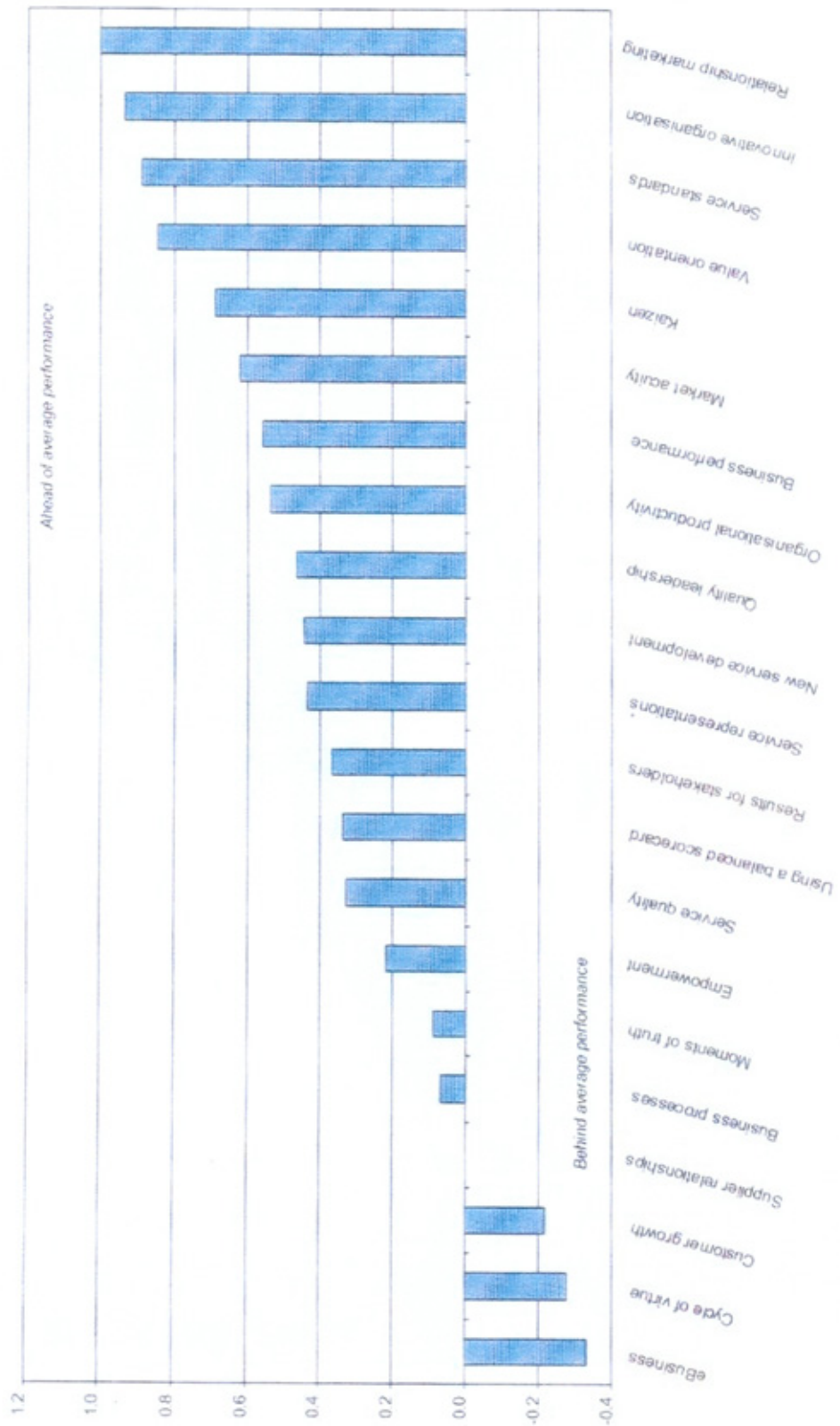


Figure 6.14: PROBE feedback for Directorate of Strategic Policy & Regeneration June 2001: "Indices gap chart"



Service PROBE in the Department of Housing, November 2002

Lee takes up the story again:

The Best Value Reviews of Housing and Environmental Services came along... again, we used PROBE to demonstrate that we were a fairly good organisation in comparison... as part of the evidence for the Best Value Inspection service and team...

The overall PROBE scores for "Housing" (practice 56%, performance 50%) were considerably lower than those of "Strategic Policy and Regeneration" the previous year (70%, 72%). There were similarities and differences in terms of the highlighted strengths and areas for improvement:

- "Continuous improvement" was again highlighted as a strength, as was "innovativeness as an organisation"
- "Customer growth" was again highlighted as an area for improvement
- "Service standards" and "value orientation", both of which were highlighted as strengths in the "Regeneration" PROBE feedback, showed up as areas for improvement in "Housing"

The facilitator's comments in the feedback report suggested that the overall practice and performance scores placed the Department in the PROBE category "could do better" (an alternative name for "room for improvement"), and that organisations in this category "...will require radical changes in management and practices to succeed."

The explanatory notes in the feedback report describe some of the highlighted indices as follows:

Innovativeness as an organisation index:

- ❑ The organisation actively supports learning, for all of its employees
- ❑ Innovation is a key component of corporate strategy
- ❑ Innovative ideas are fully supported and given credit.

Customer growth index:

- ❑ Quality and productivity lead to both increasing the customer base through expanded sales and to increased customer retention which can result in more profitable customers
- ❑ These organisations tend to also have fast product development and to be innovative.

Service standards index:

- ❑ Effective organisations set standards that are based on customer needs and are challenging
- ❑ These standards will include measures of process performance and outcome
- ❑ To ensure effective performance, leading organisations ensure that they provide employees with the resource and support to achieve these standards of performance.

Value orientation index:

- ❑ The organisation is actively seeking to create value for its customers
- ❑ Non value adding activities (waste) are eliminated
- ❑ This is supported by proactive support functions (“the back office”).

The PROBE feedback for Housing and Public Services is summarised in Table 6.5 and Figures 6.15 - 6.17.

Table 6.5: Summary of feedback from the PROBE diagnostic benchmark of Housing and Public Services Directorate in November 2002

Overall PROBE scores	<u>Organisation C</u> Practice 56% Performance 50%	<u>Comparison group (Public Service organisations)</u> Practice 62% Performance 64%
STRENGTHS: Identified areas in which Org'nisation C appears to lead relative to comparison group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovativeness as an organisation • New service development • Continuous improvement ("kaizen") • Empowerment 	
AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT: Identified areas in which Organisation C appears to lag relative to comparison group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value orientation • Service representations • Service standards • Customer growth • Service quality 	
Extracts from narrative of feedback report	<p>"The Directorate is using SERVICE PROBE as one... approach to Best Value within its focus on 'Challenge, Compare, Consult and Compete'... In seeking to make positive changes within the Directorate the team has embraced a number of techniques including the European/British Model for Excellence and team members were well aware of how all the improvement tools inter-related for the production of an appropriate action plan. SERVICE PROBE is not the first technique to be adopted and as such a number of actions had already been implemented as a result of 'inspections' as well as the improvement tools themselves."</p> <p>"The organisation has a strong structure for service development and uses a wide range of benchmarking techniques to determine actions for improvement. It also encourages its employees to be involved in improvement activities through Quality Improvement teams, Suggestion Schemes, Quality Circles and regular team meetings. It has stressed the need for innovation to improve services for little or no extra cost and sees this as key to success in the future. An 'Innovators Budget' has been established across the authority to facilitate the process."</p>	

Figure 6.15: Service PROBE feedback for Directorate of Housing and Public Services in November 2002: "Scattergram"

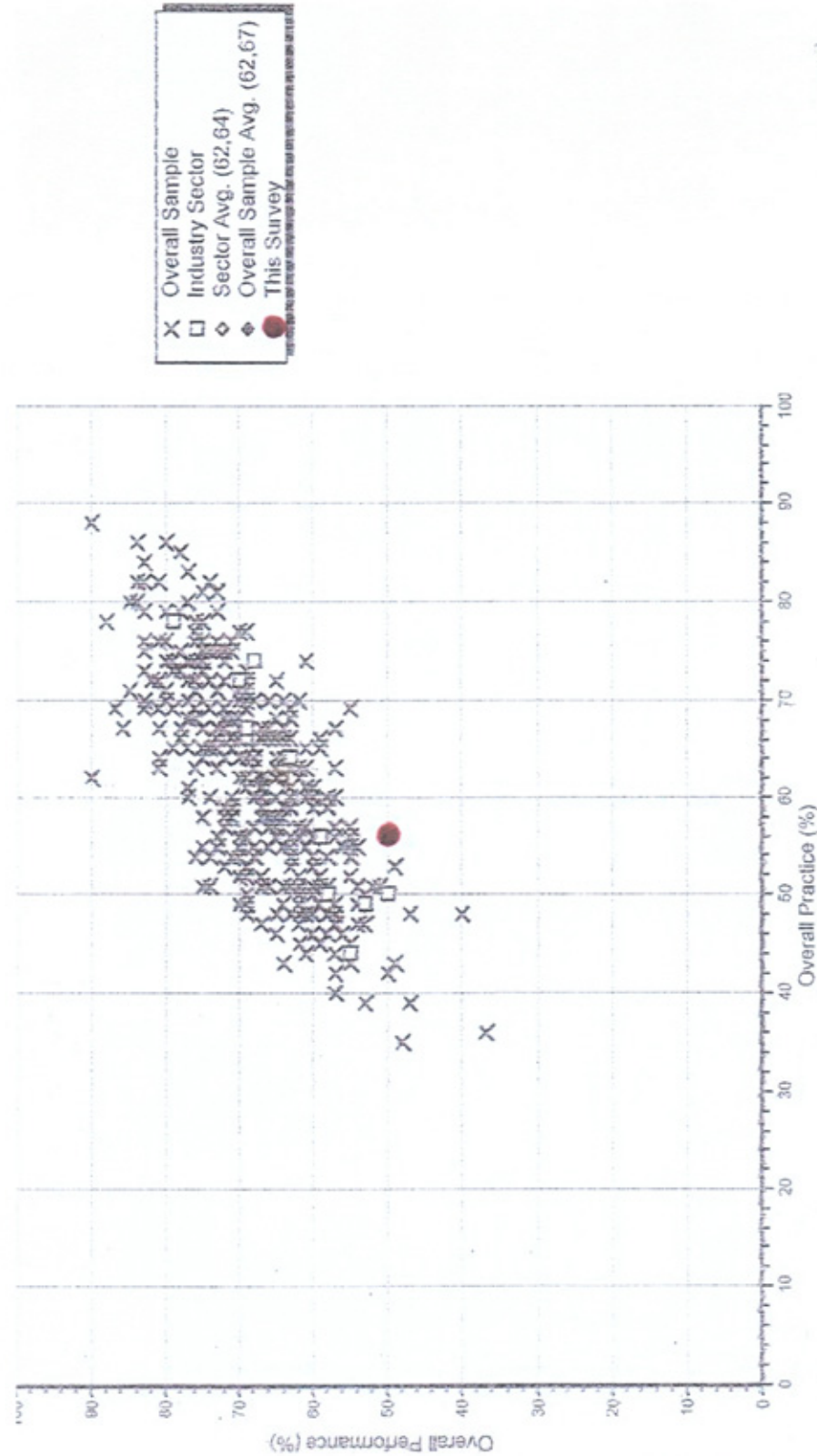


Figure 6.16: PROBE feedback for Directorate of Housing and Public Services in November 2002: "High level quartiles chart"

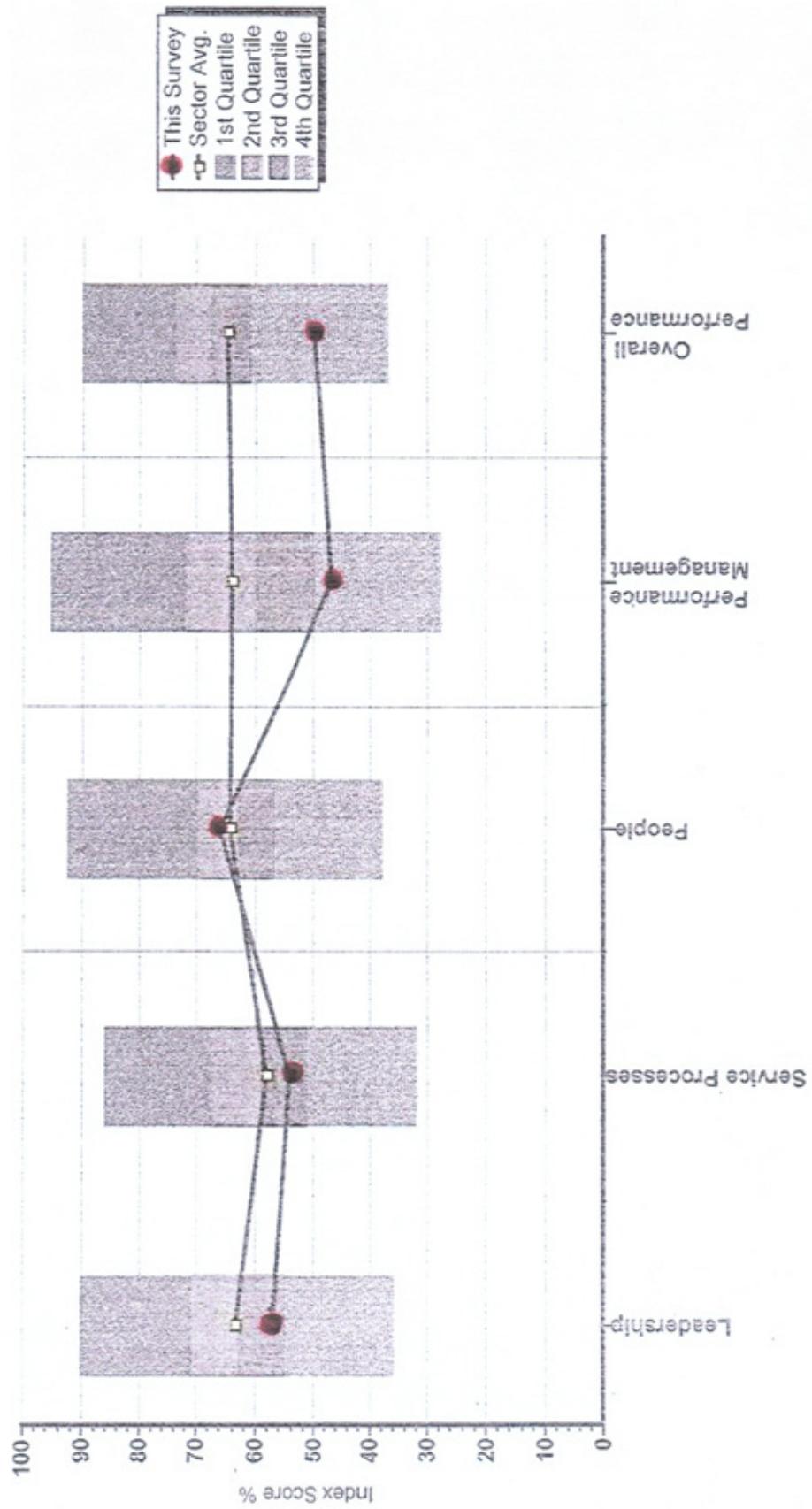
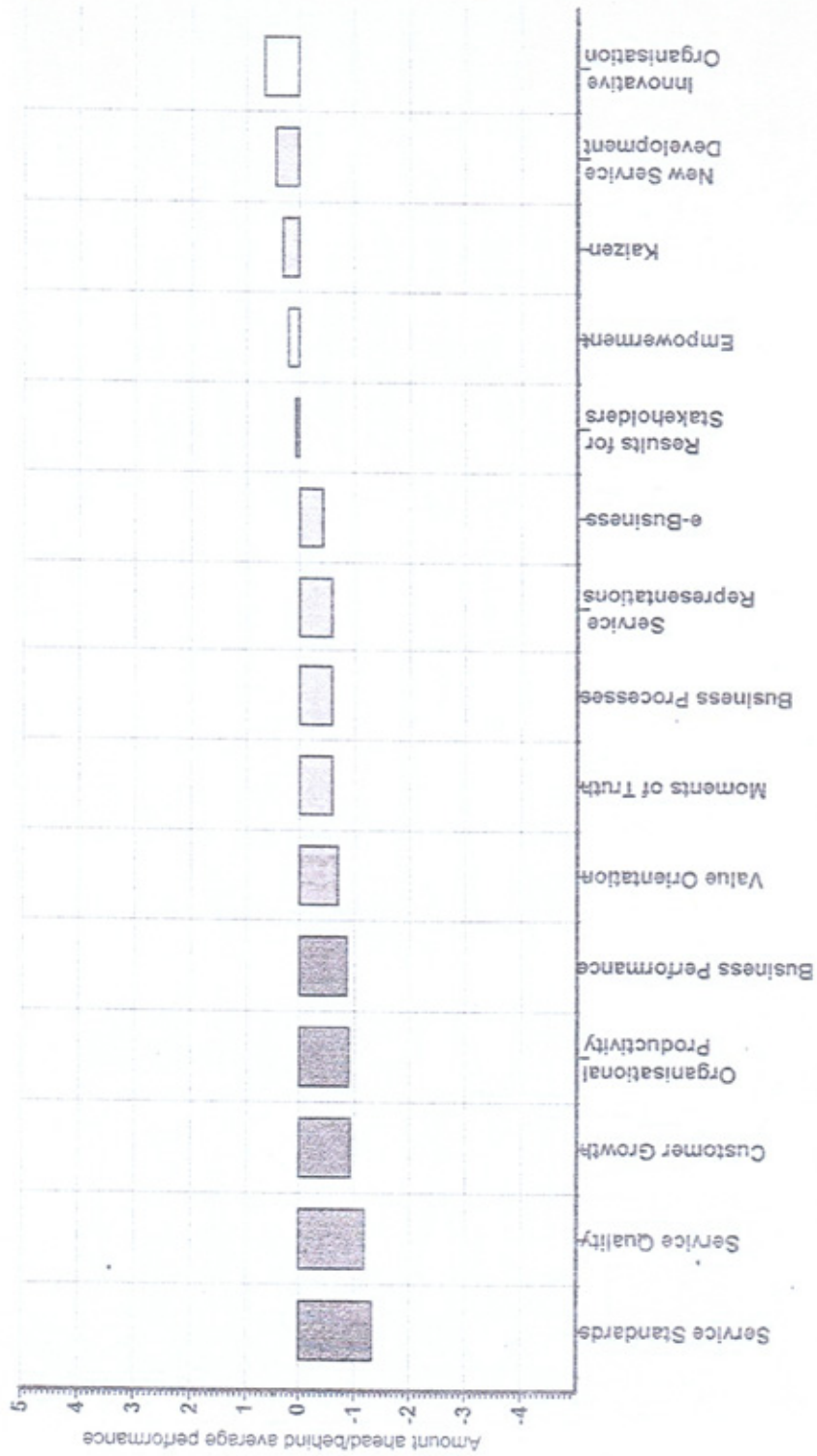


Figure 6.17: PROBE feedback for Directorate of Housing and Public Services in November 2002: "Indices gap chart"



Service PROBE in the Directorate of Environmental Services, January 2003

The PROBE feedback for the Directorate of Environmental Services is summarised in Table 6.6 and Figures 6.18 - 6.20. It included higher overall scores (practice 64%, performance 65%) than the "Housing" PROBE two months previously, but lower than "Regeneration" from 2001. "Innovativeness as an organisation" was again highlighted as a strength, and the three highlighted areas for improvement were all common with "AFIs" highlighted by the "Housing" PROBE:

- ❑ Service representations
- ❑ Service standards
- ❑ Service quality

The explanatory notes describe these indices as follows:

Service representations (or "tangibles") index:

- ❑ The processes of excellent organisations are supported by attention to the tangible elements such as the representation of services, and appearance
- ❑ They also focus on processes ensuring high accessibility of those services.

Service quality index:

- ❑ Good service management leads to high service quality on dimensions such as reliability, staff responsiveness and courtesy
- ❑ A well designed and delivered service will provide a distinctive service, meet customer needs and have a clarity of service concept
- ❑ These in turn will lead to value and growth in customer satisfaction.

Table 6.6: Summary of feedback from the PROBE diagnostic benchmark of Environmental Services in January 2003

Overall PROBE scores	<u>Organisation C</u> Practice 64% Performance 65%	<u>Comparison group (Public Service organisations)</u> Practice 62% Performance 64%
STRENGTHS: Identified areas in which Organisation C appears to lead relative to comparison group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship marketing • Supplier relationships • Business processes • Innovativeness as an organisation • Results for stakeholders 	
AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT: Identified areas in which Organisation C appears to lag relative to comparison group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service representations • Service standards • Service quality 	
Extracts from narrative of feedback report	<p>"Environmental Services is aiming to be the 'industry leader' and feels it is approaching this status. It recognises that it has to change and innovate to develop new and improved services to attain this position. It aims to achieve this through a high level of co-operation both internally with all staff and also externally with its customers, suppliers and other stakeholders."</p> <p>"... these [overall practice and performance] results place... Environmental Services in the 'Contender' category. 'Potential Winners' or 'Contenders' can, typically, be characterised by the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the organisation's people are highly committed and skilled. They are generally prepared to 'pull out the stops' in order to overcome any short-comings in systems and procedures • there is a high degree of success in operational areas and performance measures are in place to monitor this success • there is a need to sustain current 'best practice' and performance levels, but also to focus effort on identified '<i>areas for improvement</i>' <p>These characteristics were demonstrated by team members during the day. "</p> <p>"Operational teams have a high level of discretion in dealing with the needs of customers and processes exist for fast resolution of problems/customer complaints and associated decision making. Feedback is always given to the employee raising the issue on its resolution... staff feel enabled to be proactive with a wide range of customers..."</p>	

Figure 6.18: Service PROBE feedback for Environmental Services in January 2003: "Scattergram"

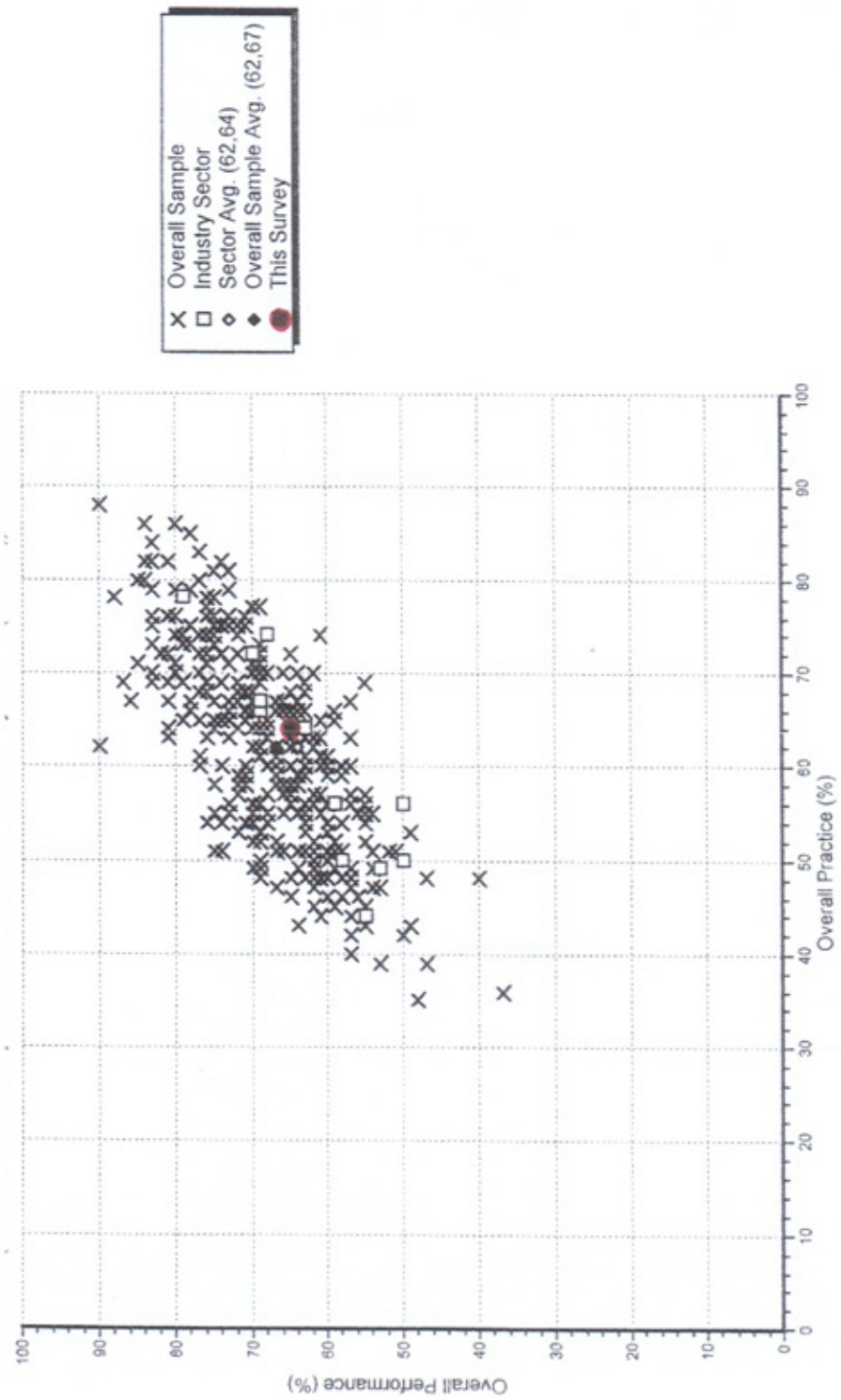
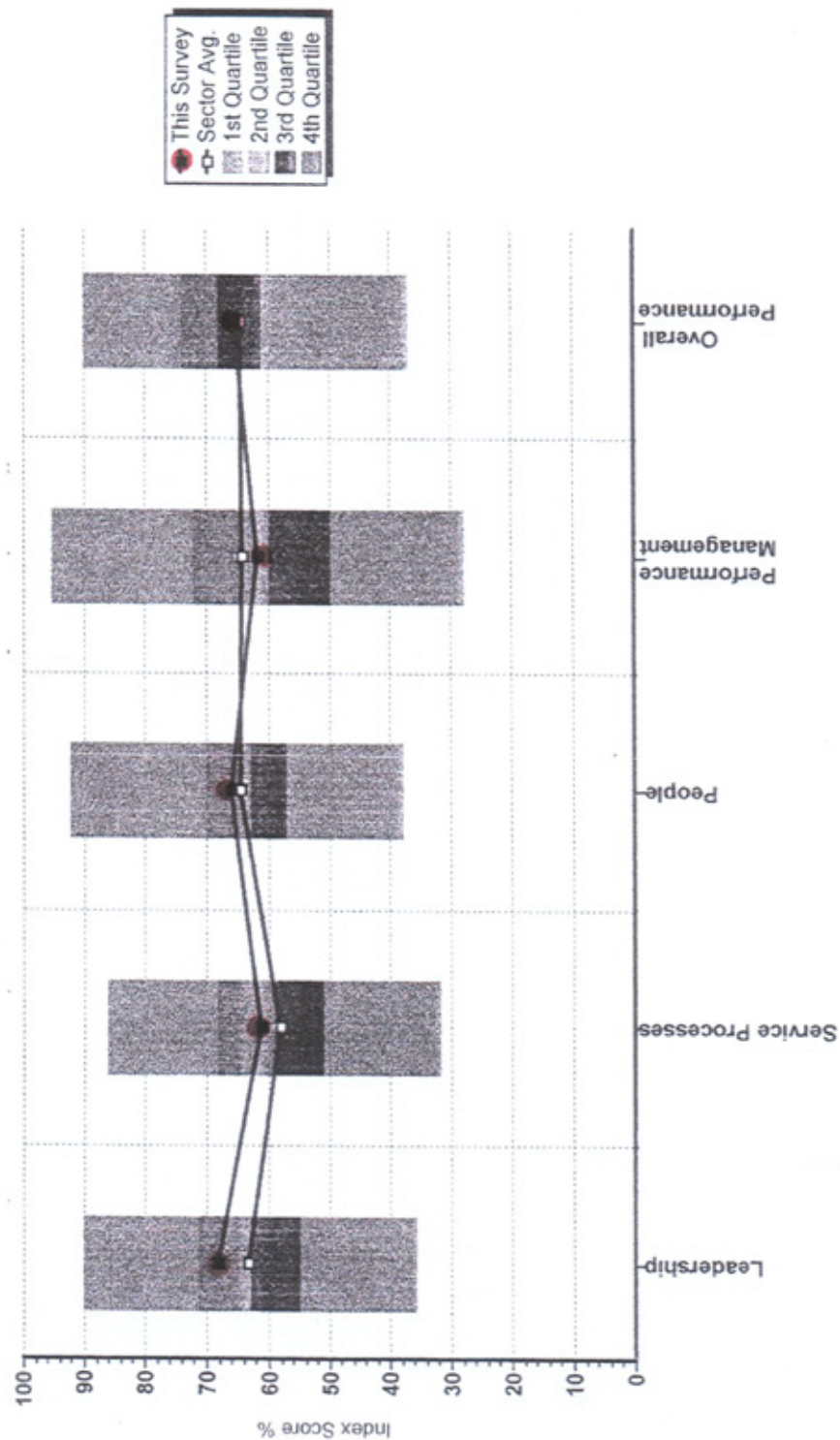
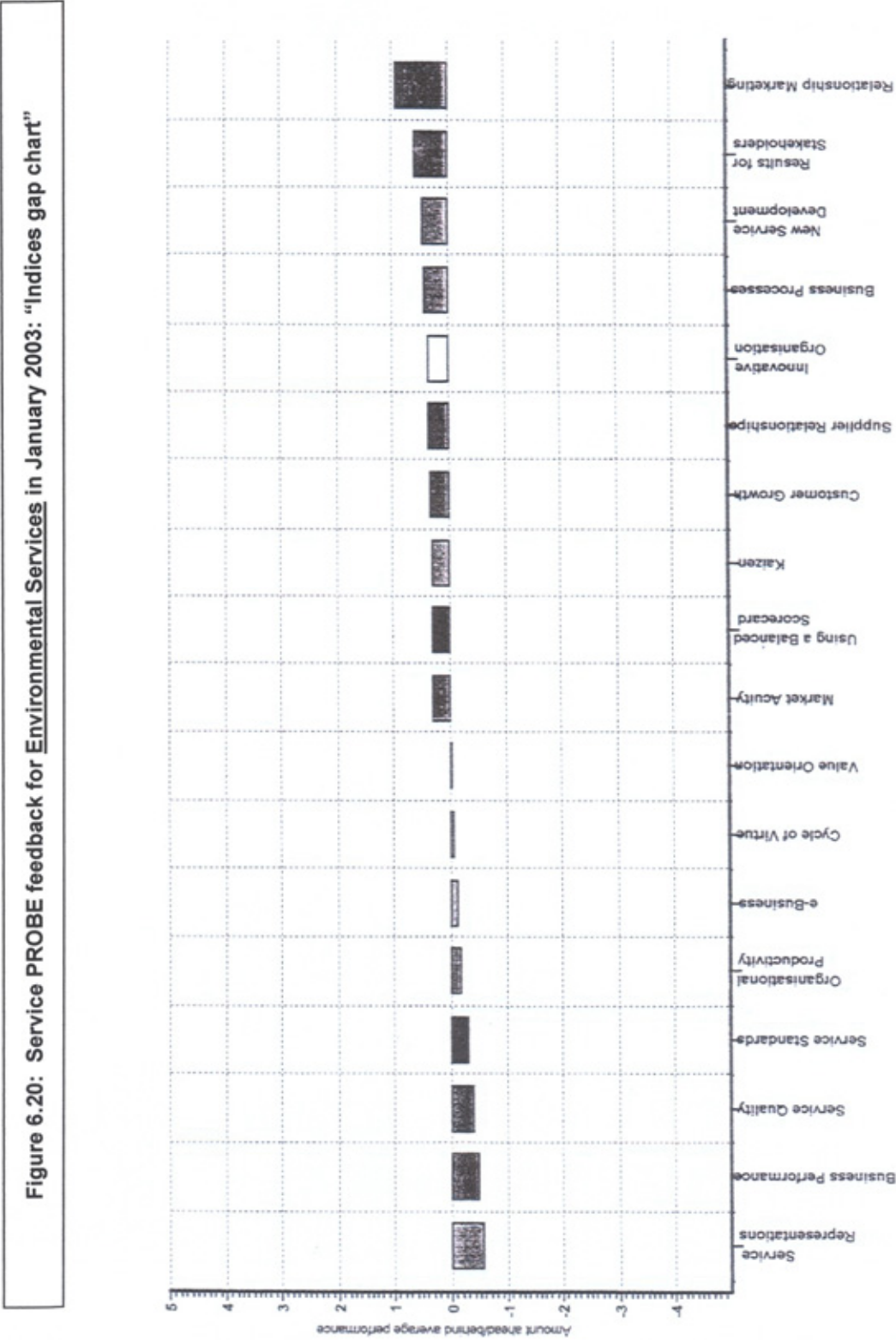


Figure 6.19: Service PROBE feedback for Environmental Services in January 2003: "High level quartiles chart"





Organisation C's second entry for the Regional Excellence Award, 2004

In 2004, Organisation C entered the Regional Excellence Award for the second time. Lee was deeply involved in this submission, and tells its story:

... just after CPA process, service heads were full of initiative fatigue... I was pushing to put a submission in to hopefully win the [Regional] Excellence Awards, because I really believe we're good enough. I convinced the Chief Executive at the time, Person W, and the agreement was that I would pull the submission together, but it would be a team approach... One person cannot do it. Person W agreed to bring the service heads into his/her office, and interview them through a self assessment process, and I would write the submission... everyone was comfortable with this. Soon after that, [Person W] made an announcement that (s)he was going to leave the Authority. So we never had a meeting ... this piece of work was left on my desk. I spoke to Person W and (s)he said, 'I'm inundated with trying to finish other work off, just get on with it.' I e-mailed the service heads, 'Please... can you help me? I need to get this submission in, can't do it without you.' I got a response, 'We've been through CPA, we've got a day job... we haven't got time for all this... it was a silly idea [Person W] wanting to put in for it in the first place.' I spoke to [Person AR - Manager of the Regional Excellence Award], explained the predicament... (s)he was more concerned that (s)he had a number of submissions in to make the awards successful... I reluctantly agreed that the submission would go in... Meantime, I've changed roles, new responsibilities... never had time to do it at work, so I took Friday and Monday off and wrote it over a long weekend, from memory more than anything... plagiarised bits from other documents... the day the submission had to be in... I phoned [Person AR]... 'I'm not putting this in'... And again, (s)he said, 'Please, please put it in even though...' So I reluctantly put it in.

... I spoke to [the new Chief Executive]... [who] had now taken over... and said 'Look, we haven't got a cat in hell's chance of winning this, but let's do it for the feedback from the assessors.' We all agreed that was the best bet. I was delighted with the assessment team... The lead assessor was the lead assessor for the national awards. I decided to be brutally honest with the assessment team, as soon as they arrived I said, 'Look, we're not in it to win it, we're in it for feedback.' They were refreshed by that... 'cos I think they were quite embarrassed, particularly because... two of the assessment team had heard a presentation I

had to give to the Institute of Quality Assurance last year... I'd explained how well [Organisation C] was doing, how a cultural shift had occurred, that we were using the Model, however it was camouflaged... and they were very encouraged by the presentation. They had got the submission documents and said, 'Wait a minute, what (s)he said and the submission document don't match'. So, I was honest them... I think it settled them down... they said, 'Right, now we know what job we've got to do here.'

Lee was speaking in February 2005, the day after the Regional Excellence Awards ceremony. (S)he had persuaded the new Chief Executive to book a table for ten people at the ceremony, and to invite guests including the outgoing and incoming Assistant Chief Executives, the Chair of the Joint Trades Unions, a Councillor and Executive Member, a member of frontline staff and two other newly-appointed Directors of the Council:

... the idea was to enjoy the event... it's the first time that we've had a full table at the award ceremony. At the back of my mind was that I hoped they were going to be inspired by the event... as the event unfolded, I realised an unplanned team building exercise was taking place... they were inspired by what was occurring. And when Organisation C didn't win anything, I realised that they were frustrated... for the first time, as frustrated as I've always been. We could do better, we could put a submission document together, and we could win this. By the end of the evening, we had agreed as a group that we will enter for the 2005 awards, that it will be properly planned and executed... and that we're going to win it next year.

It came as no surprise to Lee and colleagues that the feedback report from the assessment team identified an overall score of 230 out of 1,000, some way short of an award-winning score. The report identified some "key themes", which are reproduced in Figure 6.21.

Figure 6.21: "Key themes" identified in Organisation C's feedback report from the 2004 Regional Excellence Awards

- ❑ [Organisation C] has put many enablers of excellence in place and is to be congratulated on its many activities
- ❑ The submission document appears to confuse activities with measurable outcomes and in particular there is limited evidence of trends, targets and benchmark comparisons for all the results sections.
- ❑ There is little to demonstrate a clear link between review of the results achieved and action plans implemented to address those results and make the necessary improvements
- ❑ There appears to be some conflict between locally agreed measures to achieve the vision of becoming best Council and those measures which are imposed by National Government
- ❑ There are limited examples supplied to aid the assessors in understanding the strength of the approach and the deployment of the various processes and systems described. More examples would help support the application rather than lists of activities
- ❑ [Organisation C] has in place many of the enablers of excellence and is achieving some positive results. However, there is little in the way of links between the enablers, results and knowledge and learning through formalised and systematic process and knowledge management
- ❑ The pride and passion of everyone who works at [Organisation C] was clearly apparent - especially at the site visit. There is a high level of activity and great enthusiasm for improvement.

Assessments based upon the EFQM Excellence Model differ from PROBE feedback, in that the assessment is made in comparison to the principles and standards of “the Model” itself, whereas PROBE assessments focus on comparisons to other organisations’ scores viewed through the lens of the PROBE tool. Nevertheless, some comparison of these different assessments can be attempted, by examining the scores awarded by the assessors for the various criteria and sub-criteria of the EFQM Model. Table 6.7 summarises the scores recorded by the assessors.

TABLE 6.7: EFQM criterion part scores identified in Organisation C’s feedback report from the 2004 Regional Excellence Awards

Criterion part	Percentage of maximum possible score
Leadership	35%
Policy & strategy	28%
People	36%
Partnerships & resources	35%
Processes	24%
Customer results	14%
People results	10%
Society results	7%
Key performance results	21%

These scores reflect the “key theme” highlighted by the assessors, that Organisation C’s submission provided little evidence of strong *results* (as opposed to *enablers*) - an illustration of the EFQM Model’s requirement for evidence, in contrast to PROBE’s reliance upon the internal team’s perceptions. This may, of course, be an indication more of the inadequacies of the submission document than of inadequacies in the results that Organisation C was achieving. The low score for “People results” echoes one of the identified areas for improvement from the 1997 PROBE - “Employee loyalty and morale”; and the stronger (than other results areas) score for “Key performance results” echoes that PROBE’s identification of “Business performance” as a relative strength.

Organisation C's third entry for the Regional Excellence Award, 2005

As Organisation C proceeded to fulfill its commitment to enter the Regional Excellence Award again in 2005, Bernie took on the lead role in preparing the submission. Speaking in June 2005, Bernie reflects upon the background and explains his/her approach:

Last year a submission was put in quite hastily ... I don't think we were that surprised when we didn't win... our Elected Members had committed through our organisation development strategy to put in an application again. My personal opinion is that, because of the decision we've taken about not using the EFQM to manage our organisation, the reason for still putting in an application is to get some external assessment of how we're doing at a time when we're not going to get any from the Audit Commission, because we're an 'Excellent Council' and they don't want to know us, they're too busy looking at poor and weak councils... I'm not going to make everybody change their way of working so that it's structured in an EFQM way. I'm going to present what we're already doing in the EFQM structure. I've got some familiarity with it from when I was working [elsewhere]. We used it in a fairly loose way there as well... If it was just for us to get a trophy, I would say, 'forget it'... but I think there is some value in getting some external assessment... the assessors aren't just interested in, 'Do you call your performance "people results" and "customer results"...' ...they are genuinely interested in 'is the organisation working?'... I think we'll get some useful feedback.

Shortly before Bernie took on this new responsibility, Organisation C had begun to use another diagnostic tool, "beta"²⁵, facilitated by the Regional Excellence Organisation; but Bernie decided to cut this work short:

Two or three beta workshops had been run [before I got involved], and the Heads of Service had gone to them and thought, 'What is all this about, this is just awful.' I stopped them and said, 'We're not going to do these, I don't think we need them'... we've got the CPA system, we've got some tools that we use, we're going to bring in a few more tools, like the

²⁵ "beta" is a questionnaire-based diagnostic tool, similar to PROBE in nature but based directly on the structure of the Excellence Model. It is described by the British Quality Foundation (2006) as an uncomplicated facilitated self-assessment service, designed primarily for small businesses.

performance improvement teams, because they will help with the problem that we've got. But I don't think we need another system.

Interviewer: What was awful about the beta workshops?

Well... this was all organised at the time when my predecessor was leaving, so I don't think (s)he had had time to embed the idea of EFQM... people didn't know what EFQM was, they didn't know the language around it, hadn't had any discussion about what it would add to how we improve. So you go along to a workshop and think, 'What am I doing here?' I had some discussion with the consultants to say, 'Can you make the EFQM model speak the same language as CPA? Because, if you can't, all we're doing is confusing people with two different sets of language.' And I reached the view, and we would have this discussion in the management team, that we didn't need that... we needed to be simple.

The Chief Executive also reflects upon the recent experience of beginning to deploy the beta diagnostic tool as part of the preparations for the 2005 Regional Excellence Awards: "I thought it was a bit of a sledgehammer to crack a nut." The initial feedback had highlighted issues that (s)he felt were already well known to the Council: "...they are on our list... the appraisal system isn't working as consistently as it might, but we've got the system, we just need to ensure that heads of service are working with it..." (S)he was clear that Organisation C could put in a good submission without needing to use beta:

I wouldn't want us just to go for this for the sake of getting the award, but it does give us an extra drive with the things we know we need to put right. And if we achieve the standard as well, that's a bonus... we would only do these things to give us extra focus to put in place what we know we need to do, and the best bit of it is that it gives an external assessment of where we are... bearing in mind that we won't be CPA assessed, the more external opportunities that we can get for that form of inspection or assessment then the more rigorous our self-challenge will be as well.

Organisation C made its third submission to the Regional Excellence Awards in Autumn 2005, and was again visited by a team of assessors. By January 2006, when I visited the Chief Executive for an update interview, the assessment team had delivered their feedback orally but not yet their written report. The Chief Executive reported the news that:

...I think it's likely that the Council will formally move away from using EFQM... following the inspection, we've taken an informal decision to do that, but I think we probably need to formally say it... there are a number of reasons for doing that, primarily based on the experience of the inspection, which might be a touch unfair... and fair in parts...

The Chief Executive explained that, shortly after the Regional Excellence Awards assessment process, Organisation C, having volunteered to be part of a pilot project, was also visited for a week by an inspection team trying out a new, prototype Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) process:

....in terms of looking at the EFQM Model of Excellence and the new CPA Model of Excellence, and the key lines of enquiry that make that up, I'm very clearly of the opinion that the CPA key lines of enquiry absolutely are what the Council should be focused on in its pursuit of excellence, or improvement of excellence...

The CPA "key lines of enquiry", in the new format that Organisation C has recently piloted, focus on "ambition", "prioritisation", "capacity" and "performance management":

...they have greater emphasis on some of the areas that the Government are expecting Local Authorities to do more of, around engagement with your public, working with, not necessarily for, neighbourhoods, communities, etc. So we are tested more and more on what we do with people, and whether we are truly community leaders, and what that means.

The experience of the Regional Excellence Award assessment had highlighted for the Chief Executive several reservations about the Excellence Model:

- ❑ Some aspects of the Model were “a force fit” for a local authority perspective, particularly “customer results” and “society results”; “...because when is a citizen not a customer?”
- ❑ An unhelpful emphasis on “processes”
- ❑ A lack of clarity about what the Model means by “leadership”.

The Chief Executive described the process through which the 2005 Regional Excellence Awards submission had been prepared. Bernie had done most of the work. The Chief Executive believed that the process had been less rushed than in 2004, but acknowledged that the organisation could have put more time into it: “...it could have had the involvement of more people... although we as management team did check it over and feed into it.... it was certainly a better submission, and one that I was reasonably happy with.” The Chief Executive felt that, in contrast to the 2004 submission, the documentation submitted in 2005 did Organisation C justice; but (s)he had clearly found the assessment process rather disappointing, and had concerns about the assessment team’s lack of understanding of the public sector:

...I would hope that my views aren’t unduly influenced by the team of inspectors themselves, but there’s bound to be a little bit in that, because I did feel that some of the team really struggled to get ‘what was the concept of an Elected Member - what was the role?’ They were more used to board members. ‘What was the role of partnership working? What was the LSP?’²⁶ And I felt that they struggled with our concept of working with the workforce. They really just didn’t grasp the way that we have of working with the unions... because it was... perhaps so alien to the private sector mentality of ‘Well we decide what we’re doing, and we inform and consult the unions...’, but it’s right at the tail end, rather than up front.

²⁶ “LSP” is a Local Strategic Partnership, defined (East Riding, 2006) as “an umbrella partnership that brings together organisations from public, private, community and voluntary sector in a local authority area. The key objective of the LSP is to improve the quality of life in that area.”

...assessing what we learnt from the EFQM - accepting that we haven't had the full feedback [yet]... we learnt many times over more from the CPA experience. And that's in part down to the Model, but is possibly down to the inspectors as well. I wasn't present at the feedback, but it hadn't gone particularly well...to the extent that [the Assistant Chief Executive] had to say to the inspectors, 'Is there anything positive you want to say about this organisation?' I understand from those that were there [that] they felt the inspectors hadn't 'got' this organisation, and that makes me question the Model...that's not to say that I want this organisation to ever be less self-aware and self-critical than it should be, but it's the only slightly negative inspection that we've ever had, and as you know we've put ourselves up for inspection many times... and have always learnt something from it, but generally within a positive framework of feedback. I'll be interested to see what they say to us formally.

The assessment and feedback process had involved the Council's Leader and Deputy Leader "...who didn't need to feel that we've wasted our time more than once."

...we felt that the CPA inspectors absolutely 'got' us.... it's likely that we will use that framework to drive all of the work of the Council, because there's nothing in it that should divert the Council away from it's priorities, or is testing ourselves against something that actually doesn't matter to the man, woman, or child in the street. It just feels more 'us'.

I asked the Chief Executive what significance (s)he attached to this recent experience, and the decision to "move away from using EFQM", in the context of Organisation C's long-term development. Did this, for instance, say something about the level of maturity that the Organisation had achieved?:

When local authorities started to get into this... quality assessment, or quality pursuit... there really wasn't a model for local authorities. Many toyed with and adopted and adapted the EFQM Model... And this organisation has learnt a lot from it, and at each stage has used it for what we needed at that time. I think we're now at a stage where CPA has moved us on into another field which allows us to really critically look at how we're performing with a package of these key lines of enquiry... which has high expectations of us. And it's quite... specific of how you would judge yourself, because a Level 4 organisation has this, this and this, and you can judge what's important to you and what's not. And that allows you to look at your authority against others, in your specialisms, or in your particular sector. But I would

be keen that we didn't lose the ability to look at ourselves in terms of other sectors, so making sure that we've taken some of the bits of EFQM... say, in terms of people - meaning internally, our own people - when we drew up the submission for [the Regional Excellence Awards], it helped identify a few of the things that we perhaps hadn't been doing as regularly as we might... in terms of staff consultation, customer satisfaction, etc. So it's an extra reminder... a checklist of things that you need to do. What we need to do now if we are going to formally move away from EFQM is to make sure that those essential bits are embedded within the CPA Model...

...the organisation has matured to the extent that we'll probably move away from referring to having any allegiance to 'models' at all... we talked last time, about the problem of staff thinking that we were always just going for whatever was the new model at that time. And I think the values of the organisation, and what we're trying to achieve in the various assessments we have, have been shown to be so well embedded within the organisation and our staff that they probably don't need to think that we are following a model. The CPA pursuit of Excellence, which is the sort of kite mark for local authorities at the moment, is probably what they need to know that we're following... people in general don't find particular comfort in thinking that the organisation needs to follow a model which has been developed for others and might be slightly alien for them. They need to feel that we have developed our approach to this whole basket of things that we've used over the years, and have a very clear idea of what we're trying to achieve... we haven't had the formal feedback from the CPA inspectors yet, but one of the things they said in the informal feedback was how impressed they'd been with the staff - that we had a very committed and enthusiastic staff... they said that rarely had they found the consistency of view, approach, knowledge of vision, knowledge of that person's part that they play... they'd used this exercise with a range of different staff, and asked them, 'If the Council was a car, what car would it be? how fast would it be going? who would be driving it?'... the consensus view was that the Council was a good quality family saloon; it was going fast but not beyond the speed limit; and they were driving it. The inspectors were hugely impressed with that. They said rarely had they seen that buy-in, because they took that as being a sign of the empowerment of the staff...

...it gives me great comfort that the organisation seems to be mature enough - we know where we're going, what we're trying to achieve... there's a comfort in the learning that we've achieved as we've gone through this, and one that would make us learn more from the CPA exercise, I hope.

Reflections upon Organisation C's experiences of diagnostic benchmarking

If we were looking to the outputs and results of Organisation C's eight diagnostic benchmarking processes to provide a clear and unambiguous picture of the progress of the organisation between May 1997 and now (May 2006), we will perhaps be disappointed at this point, because it is clear that they are not able to do so. There is no clear trend in the overall scores, nor an easily-discernible pattern in the individual practice and performance areas pinpointed as strengths and areas for improvement. But perhaps it would not in any case be a reasonable expectation that a simple pattern would emerge - the benchmarking process has, after all, been applied to several different parts of the organisation over these years, and might reasonably be expected to be revealing patterns of similarity and difference between these various subsets, as much as or more than identifying trends over time.

Table 6.8 summarises the overall practice and performance scores for each of the PROBE benchmarks at Organisation C.

TABLE 6.8: Organisation C's overall practice and performance scores for four PROBE diagnostic benchmarks between August 1997 and January 2003

Date	PROBE tool	Scope	Practice score	Performance score
August 97	Service PROBE	Organisation C	54%	55%
June 01	Service PROBE	Directorate of Strategic Policy & Regeneration	70%	72%
November 02	Service PROBE	Department of Housing	56%	50%
January 03	Service PROBE	Directorate of Environmental Services	64%	65%

What is clear from these scores is that Organisation C has not yet demonstrated through PROBE assessments that it is able to measure up to what PROBE's authors describe as the standards of "world class service". Voss, Blackmon, Chase, Rose and Roth (1997) define this standard as the achievement of overall practice and performance scores which both exceed 80%. Their Anglo-American study in 1997 indicated that at that stage some 5% of U.K. service organisations studied, and 13% of their American counterparts, were achieving this standard. Organisation C's four sets of PROBE scores, for the Organisation as a whole and three different organisational units, have placed it twice in the category which the PROBE feedback reports describe as "room for improvement", and which Voss *et al.* describe as "weak" (practice, performance scores between 50%, 50% and 60%, 60%); and twice in the "contenders" (or "potential winners") category (scores between 60%, 60% and 80%, 80%).

During our interviews, several of the research participants have reflected upon Organisation C's experiences of diagnostic benchmarking. For example, despite his/her initial protestations that (s)he was not very familiar with tools such as the EFQM Excellence Model and PROBE, Frances has some knowledge of, and views about, the way they have been used within the Council:

...I think the EFQM Model has been used a lot. And I guess it is a point in time thing - if an organisation is not quite sure of 'how do you move from where you are to where you want to be?', I think the EFQM Model does give you a good structure which you can follow... 'FIOD' - 'Fully Integrated Organisational Development' - includes all the elements of EFQM... we've sort of adapted it, so that it fits in with what we're doing... I think it's a step as well, isn't it?... if you start at the beginning, it's probably a big muddle for some organisations... saying, 'Well what do we do first?'

Frances confirmed that s(he) is not familiar with the details of PROBE either, but commented on the Council's use of PROBE and a number of other approaches to assessment and comparison:

I must admit, the one thing about this Council, it's not scared of external facilitation, or opening itself up for criticism, or whatever. That's a positive.

Bren is convinced that the Council's use of quality improvement tools and models, including diagnostic benchmarking, has been beneficial:

...we've developed as an organisation through using a lot of tools. We've trained something like forty people in the Business Excellence Model; personally I don't see that we are getting the full benefit of that, because they are not being used, but we are plugging away... trying to... ensure that it has been built into our organisation development strategy, it's been built into our service planning process and we are using it to develop improvement plans. It is part and parcel of our Best Value tool kit and therefore it has been an important part of how we have looked at our strengths and areas for improvement.

Bren him/herself is one of the forty people to complete Excellence Model assessor training in 2000 or 2001:

I haven't practiced as an assessor, I've used my training to understand the Model better and develop my own way of using it, and of getting other people to understand the Model and how it actually can help them. It's very difficult to understand when you are openly criticising yourself or somebody else... and they are very defensive, and that's what I wish we could get out of local government, is defensiveness... it's improvement, this is a good thing ...

Joe is another who has completed Excellence Model assessor training; and has experience of applying these skills in practice, as a member of an assessment team for the Regional Excellence Award. (S)he too believes that the Council has not yet derived the full potential benefit from the investment it has made in this training:

It was interesting to work in a team of people from different organisations ... from the Inland Revenue, private companies, all working together... when I was training, the [person] sitting next to me was a Lieutenant Commander in the Royal Navy... And I would be overawed in a way... and found out (s)he was an expert on the navy, but didn't know very much more than that. And there was a solicitor, there was another senior person. And they... couldn't adapt their thinking to things that were quite obvious to me. And that would be the same for me... what they saw as a strength, I couldn't see; and what I saw as a strength, they couldn't

see, until it was explained. Such a thing was there was a council where the bin men hadn't been on strike for five years, and I said, 'That's a strength.' (S)he said, 'No, it's not...tell me why it's a strength then.' 'It's a strength if you're a bin man... and you want to take a job at that authority and... you want a mortgage and they ask where you work... "I'm going to work at such and such council." "Oh, right, you can have a mortgage." But if you've got a strike every year, you wouldn't get a mortgage, you wouldn't want to work there.' 'But where does that impact on society?' I said, 'Can you imagine if you lived on a street that leads to the council depot, and there is a strike? What it's like living in that street? With picket lines and...' 'I never thought about that.' ...it was enjoyable, it was fun to learn...

...we've got about 40 people trained here, we haven't got 40 people active... we have got a resource that we haven't used. And [the then Chief Executive] said, 'Aye, I'll tap into those.' But (s)he hasn't.

Sam, too, is a trained assessor, with some experience of assessing other organisations, including a hospital:

...that was really interesting; it was pretty similar... maybe hospitals are similar to a local authority, how they work, their structures and ...how the director actually walks the floor, and you ask him/her, 'Why do you do that?'... and you ask the staff why (s)he doesn't! [laughs]. It was very good, I enjoyed it.

Sam echoes Bren's and Joe's comments, that the Council's investment in EFQM Model training may not have delivered the intended impact, but (s)he does perceive that benefits have followed from it:

...I think quite a big benefit. People who have actually been trained on it, when you are doing the restructure in your unit, I think that's when it helps. Because they go, 'Oh, he might be at risk' or 'She's at risk'... but when they look through it, through the things like the People and the Resources and all that, and what trends to look at, I think it helps you because you can say to the Unions, 'That's not working because of that, that and that.'

...[it's helped with] the way we think... But, again... there's quite a few [trained assessors who have] left the Authority now...

Joe is quite clear that the Council's deployment of PROBE on several occasions has yielded benefits, although when I pressed him/her to provide a specific example of an improvement that had happened as a result, (s)he was unable to do so:

I can't think of them, because at that point in time it was [a colleague] who said, 'Joe, you should get to know about PROBE.' I came up and was in with them... this is about... 2 years ago I would think.

Joe feels strongly that the Council needs to get better at communicating and celebrating its successes, including sharing news about the actions and improvements that follow from benchmarking and assessment processes:

...you can imagine those [people] who have sat around there in overalls, and they have scored... and the department says, 'From the PROBE, we are going to do this, this and this. We will come back here in six months and tell you how well it has gone, and if you want some of you can be involved in that.' They would have said, 'Hey, great.' [But] nobody gets to know what's happening.

...there really should be a process starting [with] PROBE... 'What's the council going to do after that? Right, it's going to do an improvement plan. How do we communicate that? Who do we want to get involved in that? When can we let these people see what a difference that has made?' And if they can see that it makes a difference, the next time we have a PROBE we might get more people coming along... we're building the groundswell of interest. And people saying, 'Look what's happening. I didn't think we could get that much difference.' Rather than, 'Right, thanks... just fill your forms in and leave them on the way out, and get back to work as soon as you can.' Now, that might be an exaggeration...

...it will be two years ago since the Housing one was done... That was the attitude to improvement I would think at that time... nobody knows what the other ones were doing, so there wasn't a sharing of responsibilities... Econ. Dev. did it first... that would probably go to committee and be lost... we don't celebrate and we don't share. Would have been better if they'd broadcast what improvements they had made through the PROBE, somebody else who hadn't heard of PROBE, would have said, 'I think we are going to do something like that... it has made a difference out there, right we'll work and see what happens with this, well what's

the next step now?' So there should be a process for PROBE that doesn't end with somebody saying, 'Cheerio, I'll take these back and analyse them... and the report will go to the Head of the Department, then if (s)he wants to let you know something about, no doubt (s)he will.'

...it's about... communication, it's about feedback, and it's about engagement.

Lee, too, is clear that PROBE has delivered benefits at Organisation C; and that, as well as enabling the Council to demonstrate the strengths of its practices and performance to external inspectors, diagnostic benchmarking has also stimulated action:

We've used the PROBE tool to demonstrate clear evidence that we are improving, but from every assessment, a service improvement plan is developed... So it's a tool for evidence, yes, to demonstrate to the Best Value inspectors that we can prove... 'This is a scientific approach, there's your evidence.' ...but this is also what we've done with it as a result. We're demonstrating that not only do we know how good or bad we are, but this is what we're going to do about it.

Interviewer: Okay... a question that comes to mind... do you perceive any possibility of a kind of corruption of the process by the fact that you're setting your stall out to improve the PROBE score from one occasion to the next?

I think it's human nature that if you can score quite high... some people might suggest that we were trying to cheat a little bit. I personally would never do that, and I think a number of my colleagues would never do that, because at the end of the day we're only fooling ourselves and it would also bring into some disrepute the tool itself... but because of the facilitation process it is very, very difficult to cheat that system...

Lee reflects upon how PROBE came to be introduced to and used by Organisation C, despite some initial resistance:

...before Best Value came along, some Service Heads would have said, 'We do not want this if it is going to involve our staff... I don't want my staff saying how bad I am, or how bad the unit is.' But the Best Value legislation has changed that mindset and consultation has to be a major part of everything that we do now... when we first went down this route, a lot of

people were concerned about 'airing the dirty washing'. I would argue we have grown as an organisation because we have used it [diagnostic benchmarking] - because there has been some maturity developed in the organisation by using the data we get from the feedback to improve our services, our facilities, and ourselves.

...If I didn't believe in something, I wouldn't have stayed with it for so long... The difficulty I found, probably because of my own immaturity, and the level I was in the organisation when I started this process, [was] selling it into a culture that just didn't want it. I have stayed with it, [which] proves that I must think there is some value in it... had I kept hitting a brick wall, it would have got nowhere. Because you can only take so much. However I am very tenacious. Luckily, [Person G] was receptive to all sorts of these things and so (s)he just drip fed... until it was accepted, and said, 'Right, we are going to do this with our team.' Some people were opposed, but bit by bit it grew and grew, as we saw the benefits of it. Best Value came along and this is where I think I am pretty good at spotting connections. I was asked for my advice by the senior management team - 'How do we deal with this?', and I thought, 'Well, I'll sort some tools out.' I didn't believe that the Audit Commission had got it right, with the Best Value legislation, and now the CPA process... I think there's a better model in the Business Excellence Model - it's already in place, it's tried and tested, [with] so many tools and techniques attached, which you can use from day to day regardless of your culture. So it was already floating around, and just an opportunity arose for me to implement it... Then I could see in a sense that the Audit Commission were struggling, on the consultation side of things. How do you engage the people? The problem wasn't the Best Value legislation. I welcomed it at the time because Compulsory Competitive Tendering was abolished, and for the first time the Government was saying, 'Okay guys, you said you wanted to be left alone to get on with it... you can get on with it, but you have got to make a difference, and tell us how you are going to do it.' That was the big shift, and lots of people got out of the organisation because the changes were too radical for them at the time. Twenty seven Service Heads down to 12 initially, just like that, because people could not cope with it. So it is about not giving in, about seeing a goal, and seeing an issue, and being clear in your own mind that you can only change things in bite sized bits, and so when the opportunity arises you just keep putting your bit in.

Bernie's view is that models and systems may have a contribution to make, but that care is needed to get the balance right:

...people here genuinely want to make a difference to people's lives, but that's hard to quantify... I can just tell it's the case... but, I suppose, if you use a model like the Business Excellence Model it's supposed to be able to capture that type of thing. This is my personal opinion, I'm dubious about a lot of the models. I think what they do is help you to make sure you've covered all the bases, make sure you've thought about everything. But I don't think a model makes you excellent, I think your attitude makes you excellent... I don't want to impose lots more systems and improvement tools on [Organisation C] unless they specifically help us to tackle something that's an issue for us. Because I think when you have got a good culture, you can spoil it by putting systems in place when they're not needed. In [Organisation W], my predecessor had worked for the Audit Commission, and put a lot of systems in place because they were needed. I think here we've got enough systems in place, we just need to get on with it and continue our work around our culture, and we need to tweak things. If anything, I think we need to take some of the systems out, we've got for example a very, very long service planning format...

What difference has diagnostic benchmarking made at Organisation C?

The Chief Executive reflects upon whether benefits have followed from Organisation C's deployment of diagnostic benchmarking over the years - drawing upon his/her experiences at other councils as well as his/her knowledge of developments at Organisation C before and since (s)he came to work there:

...those tools coming about... was among the first time that local authorities started to critically sit down with your staff and assess what you were doing, why you were doing it, what its results were, what we expected from it, the impact it had on people. And... starting to go down the route of 'business planning' or 'service planning', which was also not a natural thing for local authorities to do... 'Best Value', targets, all those sorts of things were starting to come to the fore... when targets first started to come out... I was pretty sceptical as to their value; and I'm a complete convert, because I saw a difference in how it transformed the team ownership, empowerment of what we were trying to do. We didn't just sit down and say, 'We'll build some factories here, we need to give some grants to businesses here...' It gave a framework that we could really pull out what we were trying to achieve.

...And it [the use of self-assessment and diagnostic benchmarking models] had lots of benefits around... team building, ensuring that all members of the team felt an importance, so even the more junior members or the supporting members in the admin. capacity... were, probably for the first time, being seen as part of the whole process... it also gave a greater push to understanding who we were impacting on. It's probably one of the first times that local authorities started to look in any focused way [at] leadership and the effect that leaders have... A lot of the value that I would see is around the people development side of things. And, obviously, out of it you become much clearer about what you're trying to achieve, and it leads you into the start of a process which is really starting to monitor your performance, and maybe even manage your performance, but to start with - monitor it. Those [are] the main benefits.

The Chief Executive's experience at another council was that the exercise of EFQM-based self-assessment led to significant changes to his/her approach:

...that exercise then leads into a continuous process, which the Model obviously isn't but it leads... from the start of that process all the way through the development of service plans, the monthly monitoring of what we were doing, our actions against targets, it completely transformed how we assessed what we were doing and what we were achieving. Because in the area I'm talking about, an area in economic development which is my particular expertise, it can be difficult to measure performance because [there are] a lot of outside influences as well. So that would be particularly where I would see it as being useful and I know that that same sort of exercise, and the use of it, happened here as well.

Interviewer: So if I take a bit of a step back from that, and just try and think about the big picture - I guess what I'm hearing is that... there are people who might come knocking on your door and say, 'here is this model, it's wonderful and will give you all the answers, produces prioritised action plans, and so on and so forth.' But what I think I'm hearing is that this is actually about a much subtler impact on an organisation...

It is.

...which is about learning? And perhaps embedding a mindset, and a style of working....?

It is, yes... it smacks so much of flavour of the month to be sold something complete, which I'm sure local authorities were in the early days of this happening. You've got to be very aware of where you're wanting to get to, and see the use of individual techniques as part of a process of developing the organisation and using what you need to use, quite subtly sometimes. Particularly as the organisation gets better at this, the last thing the wider staff want is to see us doing something different. So I would see us undertaking our continuous organisational development, by a number of steps that are specifically designed to take us onto the next one, we [may] use a particular technique but I think it's done in a more subtle way than flagging up to people that 'we've bought a different way of doing things'. Having said that... when specific pieces of work are done with service units, perhaps to tackle particular difficulties around performance or structuring exercises or risk assessment exercises, they will use distinct tools... But they'll use the ones that people here are used to.

There's a number of people now that will use PRINCE 2 principles²⁷ for doing things, and I wouldn't shy away from doing that, but I wouldn't want to say, 'Right, the whole Council has adopted PRINCE 2', because it smacks of 'Ooh, where are we going next?'

Lee describes an incident that followed one of the PROBEs at Organisation C. A joiner, who had been a member of the PROBE team, came to see Lee soon after the consensus and feedback meeting:

...[and] said to me, 'Pity you don't know more about joinery – I'm going to tell you something that you'll not believe, and it's so simple that I can save this authority £40,000 a year... I've just worked that out on the back of a tab packet... there's a left hand lock and a right hand lock on a door, did you know that?' I said, 'No I didn't.' (S)he said, 'When I ask the foreman for some equipment, or any of my colleagues do, I'll go and look for a door, and I'll sit back and I'll read the paper and a lock will come and it's the wrong lock... and because we hate our supervisor we've got him/her running around like this all day. But I started to think about this when you said something the other day in the workshop about how much things like that cost the authority... with him/her running around, sometimes I can sit there eight hours a day and do nothing. I started to add that up, and probably it's more... but it's just my estimate of what it would be.' We looked into it, and the times this was happening was unbelievable, and this Foreman Supervisor with a bit of training... it just stopped like that, nobody has got wrong for it, this [person] has told me (s)he feels over the moon that I've listened to him/her and we've done something about it... and the Supervisor has had the proper training to say, 'You do not accept a chitty like that, the store [person] is now not allowed to release stuff unless it's a proper diagnosis of what is required.' A bit of simple training that cost us maybe a week out of the Operative's time saved the Authority maybe £40,000. Now, if I'd gone 'Right, thanks for that', and I'd gone to the Supervisor, 'What are you playing at? What's going on here?'... well, (s)he would have got onto him/her, and we wouldn't have won anything probably. And that's why I say to you, it's really important that when the staff come to you and they talk to you, they're prepared to put their heads on the block, that you never ever stab them in the back... you've got to be seen to be somebody that they can trust...

²⁷ "PRINCE2" (PROjects IN Controlled Environments 2) is "a product-based approach for project management that provides an easily tailored and scalable method for managing IT and other business projects." (The Computer Language Company, 2006)

Lee suggests that this is an example of the diagnostic benchmarking process acting as “a catalyst” for some improvements that are beneficial for the Council:

Some people might say, ‘Well, right, you’ve done that, that’s the feedback, end of story.’ But what I’ve found is that you’ve built a relationship with a new team every time, who maintain that relationship with you and with others ...a perfect example was when we did PROBE in Regeneration, and we brought in the secretaries, people from the planning side, regeneration specialists, all levels, junior members of staff, and we started going around, and one of the secretaries said, ‘I’m listening to all of you... you produce all of this, we don’t produce anything, we do not benefit the Authority in any way, we’re really just typists.’ And I said, ‘You know [a particular building scheme]?’ And (s)he said, ‘Yeah.’ I said, ‘Who wrote all of the specification detail for it?’, (s)he said, ‘Well [X] did.’ And I said, ‘Who typed it?’ ‘Well, I did.’ ‘So would Government have accepted a handwritten copy of that submission?’ (S)he said, ‘Well, no, that wouldn’t have been professional.’ I said, ‘Do you understand where your input comes into it now, then? You’ve done that, so you do share a process.’ (S)he walked out of there, and it was dead funny, (s)he says, ‘You know, I’ve got [the building scheme] built!’ So for the first time in his/her life (s)he thought, ‘Golly, what I do is valuable.’ It opened up a lot of things for her. I’ve seen a big change in that person as a result of that, because (s)he’s now starting to think out of the box a little bit, and starting to get more involved in other things, and volunteering... a bit like, I suppose, the Hawthorn Studies²⁸... who had been given some interest... felt they had been made a bit special and as a result they thought, ‘I do have an impact in this organisation, I’m not just a typist.’ A lot of it is up here, isn’t it? It’s just psychology...

I asked Lee whether, at the time when (s)he had been instrumental in making the arrangements for PROBE to be used within Organisation C, (s)he had foreseen the sorts of “spin-off” benefits that (s)he had just described:

...I’m trying to truthfully answer that... ‘Well, was it PROBE, or was it because of a number of mechanisms? Was it because the cultural change was starting to happen?’ But what I go back to is, if it was PROBE, or if it was any other tool, the fact that it worked was good

²⁸ Elton Mayo’s research at Western Electric’s Hawthorn Works (1927-1932) demonstrated that when attention is paid to people in the workplace, the act of paying more attention tends to lead to higher levels of productivity. See for example Lucas (2006).

enough for me, and for the organisation. So my argument is that it could be any tool, and it could be the fact that you're sharing information with individuals at all levels, that it's bound to work anyway. But as a mechanism, a structure, I find PROBE very easy to use, so I tend to use PROBE more than I would, say, the Business Excellence Model at that level. So the answer is I'm not sure until I've thought that through...

What had been Lee's expectations of benefits that had led him/her to decide to arrange the PROBE diagnostic benchmarks in the first place?:

It's human nature, whether we like it or not... we are very competitive, as individuals and as organisations. Isn't it nice when someone turns around, who is independent, and scientifically proves that you're as good as so many percent within the country? What a nice feeling that is. I think that's why it works, because with the best will in the world people want to be on top... it's about demonstrating and proving that you're as good as an organisation in another part of the country or in another part of the world, and there is the evidence to prove it...

People want to belong to something... that's quite an important part of what PROBE is about... for a junior member of staff, they have been part of the process all of the way through, they've seen where they've mapped, they've listened to everybody around the room, to the boss, to the Supervisor, and to other colleagues, and they've thought, 'Yeah, that's true...' And some of them think, 'This is fantastic, I'm sitting with the boss and I'm disagreeing with them, and I'm not getting wrong for it. The boss is actually saying, "You've got a point, you're right"...' because a lot of the facilitation that we do prior to the workshop is, 'As a supervisor, or a head of service, you do not dictate.' There is always somebody there - it might be myself, or Cameron - to prevent anyone from bullying anybody... everyone has a right to speak their mind, and there's no repercussions... that's the only ground rule we've got. And when they've been a part of that process, and they've seen where they lie, it's just human nature that you want to be a part of that process again... That's what I've found over the years, that's how I say 60% of the staff are on board. I reckon if you got rid of all the service heads tomorrow - it would be a fantastic experiment - those 60% staff could make this place run. Okay, there would be problems, but I guarantee overnight there would be some sort of untapped potential, and they would just develop like that.

Lee had described the major improvement that (s)he had seen occurring in the culture of Organisation C over the last ten to fifteen years, and his/her perception that high levels of involvement and empowerment were now features of that culture. Given that background, I expressed surprise that members of PROBE teams would find it an unusual experience to be sitting in that kind of a forum with "the boss", and being listened to. Wouldn't this sort of thing be happening anyway, as part of "business as usual"?:

It would happen in pockets ... [but] things can start to slip... it does happen generally within the organisation, but while the Best Value Review is in progress, you can't escape it within your part of the organisation. So if we're doing a Best Value Review of Housing, you can't escape going through that process; but if Regeneration has been through it, they can escape it... so it might not be happening there much. What I would say is that the philosophy and the way we operate, is starting to become a norm... and it's tools like PROBE that have created that. When you look at the people around the table, yes there's cynics... There's one person I can think of straight away who is cynical about everything... 'That was a waste of time, I knew the answer anyway... it was no use to me, a few questions and who really cares?' You get those characters. But for some junior members of staff, and for some senior managers as well, the penny drops. If they are brutally honest with themselves and about the process, and they go in there with the right intentions, then the tool really does work for them.

Morgan recalls the reactions of PROBE team members when (s)he completed the facilitation of the "Strategic Policy and Regeneration" PROBE:

...the immediate things were, 'I've learned something about my own council, the offices that I work in, the processes that go on, and what people think.' 'I like the team approach.' Such quotes as, 'Do you know, we've never had a debate like this before... we've never actually uncovered and poked around these particular aspects...' Because, after all, there's a vast scope of talking to be done on 90 questions, isn't there?... So those are the sort of things that you find - 'We've never actually discussed this area before...'; 'It's been useful.'; 'We haven't discussed it in this way...' ...this sort of methodology... there's lots of nurturing comes out of it, learning... learning to do it this way, learning to be a part of the team... 'constructive', and 'it's a very candid process'... these are all the sort of things that I've jotted down.

Plans for further deployments of diagnostic benchmarking at Organisation C

As I gathered data in Organisation C between late 2003 and early 2006, I was told by several research participants on different occasions that the Council was planning to deploy PROBE diagnostic benchmarking again. Lee, speaking in January 2004, explained that (s)he anticipated that PROBE would be deployed again soon in three linked contexts:

We're currently looking at the scope and rationale for the next Best Value Review - of Support Services. But in addition we have gone down an 'ALMO'²⁹ route for [a service - not named here to preserve Organisation C's anonymity]. It scored very poor in its Best Value Review. We realised prior to the Inspectors coming that it would be a difficult service - the history of local government and CCT³⁰ dictated that a lot of the frontline services were not competitive and we decided we were going to do something about that, which culminated in the Authority making the decision to use the ALMO route and legislation to change the organisation. They also decided to go into partnership with two concordat authorities. So, if you like, we have a bastardised version of an ALMO through 'the Concordat', and a realisation that we don't need the support services that we've had in the past.

This particular Best Value Review is probably going to have more impact across the organisation than any other. Our philosophy is that we try and retain positions and jobs... if we can, we try to TUPEE transfer services over where there's the likelihood of redundancy, or to re-skill individuals to get another job. We intend to use PROBE again, to show cost effective, efficient service delivery across the ALMO, the concordat and the support services.

Seven months later, when I interviewed Bren in August 2004, (s)he was involved in formulating plans for the Best Value Review of Support Services, and repeated Lee's suggestion that PROBE may well be part of the process:

...we are arranging a day to go and scope that... part of that scope will be looking at the process. It's somewhat difficult for us because it is the first review that we have done involving people who normally do the independent review support... the Corporate Development Unit... and because of the issue of constraints of time... we've legally got to

²⁹ ALMO - "Arms Length Management Organisation"

get it done by the end of next March [March 2005]... because the resource is in the unit, and because of issues of independency, we are looking to seek some external support... We want somebody to come and deal with what we want them to do with the independency of their expertise... That may well, because it's multi disciplinary, involve PROBE... but a decision may be chosen that we don't follow that line... we are hoping to scope and get that decision in the next couple of weeks.

...I think it [PROBE] would be ideal for our Support Services... as far as I'm concerned, it's going to help us significantly. I think you might get a different outcome about where we pitch. They might not score as highly.

Despite the apparent urgency that Bren was describing, no decision had been taken about the potential deployment of PROBE by the time I interviewed Lee again a month later, during September 2004. Lee referred to the recently-published Gershon Review (Gershon, 2004), suggesting that this would serve to increase the pressure on Bren to get moving on the Best Value Review of Support Services, and reiterating that PROBE was very likely to be included as part of the process of that Review. As events unfolded, a few weeks later I learned that Bren was going to leave Organisation C and move on to a job elsewhere, and that responsibility for the Best Value Review of Support Services would be picked up by somebody else. In the meantime, another possibility was emerging as the next likely deployment of PROBE. Lee explained in February 2005 that (s)he had now been asked to get involved in moving the review of Support Services forwards:

You know my frustration about that review - it should have been done a long time ago. Bren felt maybe too close to it. It's very easy to do Best Value Reviews to others, but when you have to do it to yourself, and when you've been in that position of doing Best Value to others, people are very critical, like you're not being as hard upon yourself as you have been on others... [Person AI - a Director] has engaged the services of the Improvement Development Agency [IDeA], a person called [Person AX]... and (s)he's going to facilitate the Best Value Review of Support Services, using external support from local consultants... I've told Person AX that I want to do a PROBE workshop, and (s)he's absolutely delighted. (S)he understands PROBE, and said, 'That's an excellent idea, we'll do one before we come in, and one after.'

³⁰ CCT - "Compulsory Competitive Tendering"

(S)he is coming in on the 8th of March to meet the Leader, the Chief Exec., myself, Cameron, Joe and the portfolio holder for Resources. And we're going to do a scoping exercise - rationale and scope for the review. Person AX wants a meeting with me straight after that meeting, to plan how we're going to proceed... when we're going to do the PROBE workshop, when we're going to do some... and (s)he's using the words 'business process re-engineering workshops'...

I've asked Person AX to have the whole exercise finished within three months. (S)he thinks it's a tall order, but I've done that on purpose because any review is painful for lots of people, and I think the quicker it's done... and, you know, if you give them a target and they miss it by a month, I haven't got a problem with that. But if it goes on and on, I think it causes lots of pain in the organisation, and that's something we could do without.

Four months later, in June 2005, I interviewed Bernie, who by then had taken on responsibility for the Best Value Review of Support Services. (S)he confirmed that it was still not underway but that would be starting soon:

I'm leading that review. We haven't started it yet, we've got the IDeA coming in this month to help us kick it off. I've heard enough about [PROBE] from Lee and others to believe that it will actually be useful in delivering the review. I will have to understand it better, I won't be implementing it personally, I'll be getting somebody who knows about it to do that, but it sounds as if it will add value...

The next update that I received on the subject of the Best Value Review of Support Services came from Lee, in March 2006. By this time, Lee had been given the go-ahead to arrange five PROBE benchmarks of different parts of Organisation C, all as part of the Support Services review. In the meantime, in recent months Lee had collaborated with the managers of the PROBE benchmarking tools, to develop the prototype of a new variant of Service PROBE, with the working name of "Public Sector PROBE." Plans were now in place to try out this new variant within Organisation C. At time of writing, May 2006, these plans are currently being finalised.

Emerging findings

It is clear from the content of this chapter that Organisation C has made extensive use of diagnostic benchmarking tools, over an extended period of nearly a decade, and that, despite delays in plans which have been repeatedly postponed, it is likely to make further use of some of these tools in the near future.

Some of the emerging findings highlighted at the end of the previous chapter have been reinforced by events and views reported in this chapter, particularly Organisation C's openness to and welcoming of external scrutiny, and its commitment to self assessment and diagnostic benchmarking - most recently demonstrated by the Council volunteering for a pilot project to test a new version of CPA; its entry for the 2004 and 2005 Regional Excellence Awards "to get some external assessment of how we're doing at a time when we're not going to get any from the Audit Commission"; its experimentation with "beta"; and its intention to deploy PROBE again as part of the BV Review of Support Services.

In addition, a number of further findings are emerging from the data and analysis contained in this chapter, including:

- that a primary objective for the key player(s) in the initial decision to bring (Service PROBE) diagnostic benchmarking into Organisation C was to demonstrate to colleagues the value of a newly-formed corporate unit; and that Lee, who was one of the key players in this decision, perceives that this objective was achieved
- that the process of completing that first PROBE apparently influenced the Director who led the team to progress to the creation of an "organisational development strategy"; and that the feedback from PROBE influenced the content of this strategy
- that an objective when diagnostic benchmarking was next deployed (Service PILOT in 1998) was to measure the Council's progress - and that this was apparently achieved (albeit that the feedback from this PILOT is no longer available to refresh memories on this point)

- that it is, however, difficult to discern from the diagnostic benchmarking feedback over the years a clear pattern in terms of the degree of excellence of Organisation C's practices and performance; despite the relatively high level of benchmarking and self assessment activity that the Council has undertaken since 1997. Differences in the format of the feedback from the several diagnostic tools deployed have contributed to this difficulty; as has the pattern of deployment which has seen the benchmarking process applied at different times to the whole organisation and to three different subsets of the Council
- that a primary objective for key players in the decision to deploy PROBE on the next occasion (in "Regeneration", in 2001) was to enable Organisation C to demonstrate to its external inspectors, the Audit Commission, that it had thoroughly complied with the Best Value requirements to "challenge" the current situation and to test the Council's "competitiveness" with respect to the provision of services relating to regeneration; and that the same key players perceive that this objective was definitely achieved
- that the perceived effectiveness of PROBE in helping the Council to fulfill the requirements of a Best Value Review, as demonstrated in "Regeneration" in 2001, was a driver in the decisions to deploy PROBE again as part of the Best Value Reviews of "Housing" (in 2002) and "Environmental Services" (in 2003)
- that a motive in making a submission to the Regional Excellence Award in 2004 was the belief that the Council might be able to win this Award; and that by the time the difficulties experienced had necessitated the submission of a sub-optimal document, the key players in this decision were content to follow the process through for the sake of the learning it would deliver
- that similar motives drove the decision to make a submission to the Regional Excellence Award in 2005; and that it has been a disappointment to Organisation C that the outcome of this submission was perceived as quite negative in terms of the result and of the nature and delivery of the initial feedback

- ❑ that some research participants perceive that a range of benefits have followed from Organisation C's diagnostic benchmarking activities: "...team building, ensuring that all members of the team felt an importance, so even the more junior members... were being involved... being seen as part of the whole process"; "a catalyst" for some improvements; but that there are some reservations about whether the Council has reaped the full potential rewards for its efforts and investments in the approach
- ❑ that Lee's personal belief in the benefits has been a major factor in Organisation C's adoption and continued deployment of diagnostic benchmarking; and that this was particularly the case when the Council entered the Regional Excellence Awards for the second time in 2004
- ❑ that it seems that, over time, some of the research participants - and perhaps other colleagues who are influential in decision-making at Organisation C - have come to perceive the benefits of diagnostic benchmarking as including a contribution to learning and people development; as well as (or instead of?) the perhaps more obvious benefits of pinpointing strengths and areas for improvement, and of demonstrating competitiveness or rigour in the review process to external assessors
- ❑ That Organisation C in 2006 remains committed to the deployment of the principles of diagnostic benchmarking and self-assessment, and that key decision-makers are convinced of the benefits of these approaches; but that the organisation has become quite focused and discerning in its views regarding where and when it will apply benchmarking approaches, and about which tools it will and will not adopt and deploy.

Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have reviewed the extensive diagnostic benchmarking activities that Organisation C's people have undertaken since 1997, and the range of perceptions and reflections that the research participants have reported with respect to these activities, their significance, their impact and their implications. I have identified that some preliminary findings identified in the previous chapter are consistent with and reinforced by the data presented here, and have highlighted additional findings which this chapter's data suggest. The next chapter will focus on one specific deployment of the PROBE diagnostic benchmarking tool, in order to further test the findings I have already identified, and to "dig deeper" into the exploration of diagnostic benchmarking's role as an enabler of organisational improvement.

Chapter 7 Organisation C's Best Value Review of Regeneration, and the role of diagnostic benchmarking within that review

This chapter will focus in depth on one specific deployment of the PROBE diagnostic benchmarking tool, which occurred in 2001, two years before I began in earnest to gather data within Organisation C. By selecting this particular deployment of PROBE for intensive scrutiny, I have been able to invite those research participants who were directly involved in that diagnostic benchmark to reflect not only upon the benchmarking process itself, but also upon the impact (if any) that it has had upon the organisation - its activities, its outputs and outcomes, and its improvement - either in the short term or over the longer term of the several years which have since elapsed.

This chapter views the deployment of PROBE within the Best Value Review of Regeneration through the eyes of those who decided to deploy it and led that deployment, those who participated as team members and stakeholders, those who prompted and supported the adoption of that particular tool in that particular situation, and those from outside the organisation who organised and facilitated the benchmarking process. In the course of the primary data collection I have interviewed the person who led that PROBE team and three of the other seven team members, plus others who were directly involved in the Best Value Review, which provided the context and reason for the PROBE to be completed, and in the broader developmental processes which were influential in the diagnostic tool's adoption for this purpose; and the person who visited Organisation C as an outsider in order to facilitate the PROBE benchmarking process. The team members have each recounted their recollections of and reflections upon the diagnostic benchmarking process and the part that it played in the Best Value Review and in the Council's development. My analysis of what they have told me reveals some common themes and some areas of controversy, which are valuable contributions towards the research aim. The other research participants whose voices are heard in this chapter have provided additional insights, perspective and context.

Ideally, I would have interviewed all eight of the members of the PROBE team, and I set out with the intention of doing so. However this proved impossible due to the unavailability of three of these people who have left the organisation, and the unwillingness of one to participate in the research. I am not in a position to know whether the additional recollections and views that these people would have been able to provide would have materially added to or altered the themes which have emerged.

This chapter is structured in the following sections:

- ❑ PROBE under the microscope: a detailed examination of the conduct and impact of one particular deployment of the PROBE diagnostic benchmarking tool in Organisation C
- ❑ Context for and beginnings of the PROBE diagnostic benchmarking process in “Regeneration”
- ❑ The PROBE process: how did the team complete the diagnostic benchmark?
- ❑ The PROBE feedback: what did the process tell us?
- ❑ The efficacy and impact of the PROBE process - did it “work”? What changed as a result of it?
- ❑ The cost of the diagnostic benchmarking process - does it deliver value for money?
- ❑ Reflections upon the PROBE process and the Best Value Review of Regeneration
- ❑ Emerging findings
- ❑ Chapter summary

PROBE under the microscope: a detailed examination of the conduct and impact of one particular deployment of the PROBE diagnostic benchmarking tool in Organisation C

In June 2001, Bren led a team of colleagues through the PROBE benchmarking process, as part of Organisations C's Best Value Review of the Directorate of Strategic Policy and Regeneration. The results of the PROBE were used within the organisation's review process, and were quoted and referenced within the substantial suite of documentation which constituted the Council's submission to the Best Value Review. The preface to that submission was written by Joe, who at the time was the "Cabinet Member responsible for Best Value":

Our aspiration is to grasp Best Value as an opportunity to learn, innovate and change the way we do things in [Organisation C's geographical area]. Through Best Value Reviews we can ensure that such aspirations are achieved. The review of the Council's Regeneration Service has been no exception. The impact on the community as a result of the demise of [the area's traditional employment base] will take a great deal of time and effort to address. We must ensure that the way we go about Regeneration achieves the very best for our people. This review has focused on people. Ultimately it is about those who want us to regenerate our community. However, it is also fundamentally about those hard working individuals, both Members and Officers that help to make it happen – the service deliverers. This review was therefore all about people. It establishes proposals for step change in the delivery of services which contribute to Regeneration, almost a third of services, delivered directly by the Council. The Council is convinced that this change will improve the social, economic and environmental well being of our community.

The submission documentation defined the aim and objectives of the Review as shown in Figure 7.1, and the Executive Summary is reproduced in Figure 7.2. The summary places considerable emphasis on the Council's and the Directorate's commitment to "... developing a culture of excellence and continuous improvement", and on the seriousness and positive spirit with which the Best Value Review had been approached; and refers to the use of "...the EFQM Quality Model... as a tool for the Review" and "PROBE... as a tool under external scrutiny to assist the Compare and Contrast processes."

Figure 7.1: Aim and objectives of the Best Value Review of Regeneration

Aim:

To fundamentally review the services that contribute to the Regeneration of [Organisation C's geographical area] in order to secure continuous improvement in service delivery for the benefit of the community within [that area].

Objectives:

- To ensure that staff, Members and other stakeholders seriously challenge the nature of the services, and the way in which they are delivered.
- To consult and involve the Council's stakeholders in carrying out the review in order that their views can be taken into account in improving the service and to establish long-term involvement of stakeholders in service improvement.
- To compare the performance of the Council with other service deliverers in terms of cost, processes and achievements in order to set standards for continuous improvement in service delivery.
- To secure independent advice as to the competitiveness of the Directorate's activities in order to inform the review process.

“Compare and Contrast” is mentioned here as one element of the “four Cs” - Challenge, Compare, Consult and Compete - which local authorities were expected to incorporate into their Best Value Reviews.

Figure 7.2: Executive Summary of Organisation C's submission to the Best Value Review of Strategic Policy and Regeneration

1) Introduction

- There has been a significant amount of change occurring as a background to the review.
- The structure and leadership of the Directorate have changed and there have been some unrelated staffing problems.
- The implications of change of political structure led to a delay in respect of Member involvement.
- Changes in personnel, both co-ordinating and driving the review generated different ideas and direction.
- The services under review are Community and Cultural Development and Community Renewal, Community Safety, Inward Investment, Valuation and Estates, Planning and Building Control and Design and Technical.
- The time was right for the review, it will enable the Directorate to take an opportunity to make significant changes in the way it delivers its service and take advantage of the potential to make a difference.
- The appointment of new Directors, the new political structure, limited benchmarking comparisons for the Directorate as a whole and developing need for consultant involvement has influenced the approach to the review.
- The aims and objectives of the review are clear and simple.
- The Directorate is committed to developing a culture of excellence and continuous improvement.
- The outcome of the review will improve service delivery to all customers. It will principally benefit the community but it will also benefit those who deliver the service.

2) What we have done – Background to Review

- Best Value Review of Regeneration required by law.
- Best Value Review carried out because the Council wanted to do it.
- Review undertaken in general accord with Council's 72 step approach.
- Council and Directorate committed to Government's vision of Modern Local Government including provision of services which are efficient and of high quality.
- The Council has committed itself to a total quality approach to Best Value Review.
- The Review has been seriously undertaken in accordance with the 4C's, Challenge, Consult, Compare and Compete. These have been seriously undertaken by the Council.
- The Council has agreed a Procurement Policy but work on a Code of Practice is not yet complete.
- The Review has an holistic approach to regeneration following the 72 Step approach.
- The EFQM Quality Model was used as a tool for the Review.
- PROBE was used as a tool under external scrutiny to assist Compare and Compete processes.

3) Where are we now? – The Position Statement

- The Regeneration service is of strategic importance in view of the demise of [the area's traditional employment base] and impact on the social, economic and environmental well being of the area.
- The Community want and need regeneration and hence this is a Council priority.
- The units that contribute to regeneration deliver a wide range of services of significant importance to the [area] and their engagement and close working relationship is of equal importance.
- Some of the services are discretionary.
- The Regeneration service contributes significantly to the Council's mission... and supporting aims.
- There is currently an establishment of 68 people engaged in the regeneration with revenue expenditure of £18 million over the last 5 years.
- There is significant and necessary partnership work through the service, in particular the Community Safety Partnership and Local Strategic Partnership.
- There is undoubted achievement in individual services that contribute to regeneration.
- There was a range of comparisons undertaken with other authorities through the process which favoured the Council in most areas. Perhaps the most significant negative comparison is in respect of I.T. development in terms of e-government targets.
- Pilot and Probe results provide evidence of competitiveness.
- In general, there is significant support for the service by stakeholders.
- In holistic terms the Directorate has contributed to some £400 million of investment in the [area] in 5 years at a cost of £18 million. It is felt that this assists in showing cost effectiveness.
- SWOT and STEP analysis have been undertaken.
- A range of key improvements have been adopted.

4) Where do we want to be? – Our Future Vision

- The Council's vision is undoubtedly shared by customers and all loyal and committed staff.
- In striving for excellence, [Organisation C's mission statement] is of benefit to everyone.
- To have a future regeneration must ensure it can show that it has improved the well-being and quality of life of [the area's] residents.
- The future vision of the service is seen in context of ten key areas:
 - demonstrating impact
 - demonstrating commitment to improvement
 - demonstrating achieving best in class
 - continuing to build a partnership and community support
 - improving a high standard of performance
 - ensuring service is open and accessible
 - improving process and information technology
 - securing awards and rewards for achievement in service delivery
 - ensuring service delivery is sustainable and equal
 - continuing to involve users and partners in service delivery improvement

5) How are we to get there? – Selecting the Route

The review has considered six options:

- Delivering the service in-house with improvements
- Developing a partnership with another local authority
- Developing a partnership with a private organisation
- Outsourcing the service
- Market testing
- Increasing the service

The options have been evaluated using twenty evaluation criteria:

- Key partner views
- Internal stakeholder views
- Members' views
- Society stakeholders' views
- Staff views
- User group, other customer views
- Improvements in service delivery/performance
- Impact of Development Team Approach
- Corporate aims/review vision
- Quality/continuous improvement
- Comparison
- Competitiveness
- Capability
- Legality
- Resource capability
- Equal opportunity/accessibility
- Cost effectiveness
- Sustainability
- Acceptable risks

Following evaluation:

- It is considered that delivering an in-house service with improvements provides the most likely way of delivering Best Value for the Regeneration Service for the next 5 years.

6) How are we going to get there – Achieving our vision

- The Regeneration Service Best Value Review Improvement Plan forms Document 3
- The Improvement plan comprises of three action plans. A Corporate Action Plan, a Directorate Action Plan and a Service based Action Plan.
- The Corporate Action Plan is principally based on accessibility and engagement of the community and in the use of improvements to staff morale as a tool to achieve improved service delivery. It emphasises the need to achieve e-government targets and policy driven budgets.
- The Directorate Action Plan reinforces the Corporate Action Plan. It goes further to address human and I.T. resources in the Directorate. It also sets out proposals to consider future service delivery options in advance of the next Best Value Review.
- There are five service based action plans which reflect partial reconstructing of the Directorate identified in the Directorate Action Plan.

7) Making sure we get there – Implementing Monitoring & Reviewing the Improvement Plan

- The Council has an agreed approach to implementing monitoring and reviewing the Improved Plan through the Service Delivery Overview Committee, the Best Value Performance Plan and ultimately the Community Plan.
- A key Directorate Officer will be appointed to co-ordinate the implementation of the improvement plan.
- This officer will be supported through a combination of the Best Value Review Team including Team Leaders.
- Stakeholders will be involved in the process through annual 'Challenge Day events' and User Groups feedback.
- Many improvements are capable of implementation through existing budgets. Those which require additional financial resources will be budgeted for early in the implementation process and budget savings and fee income surpluses will be allowed to help finance service improvement.
- A risk management process will be put in place.

The “bottom line” of Organisation C’s submission to the Best Value Review is identified in section 5 of the Executive Summary: “It is considered that delivering an in-house service with improvements provides the most likely way of delivering Best Value for the Regeneration Service for the next 5 years.”

The role of the PROBE diagnostic benchmarking process within the Best Value Review is summarised in the overview document of the Council's submission, as follows:

Results of Probe

The results of PROBE were very encouraging. They identify as a result of external assessment that the Directorate expressed competitiveness. The assessors were very complimentary about the Directorate's commitment to improvement. The results pinpoint the Directorate in the top 20% of the overall sample and top 16% of Public Service organisations benchmarked in that way. When comparing the Directorate with other Public Services and Local Government Organisations the Directorate scores substantially higher than the average of these sections. The Directorate was described as "potential winners in achieving world class performance." The assessors felt that a ten point improvement in practice and performance would shift it to being World Class. Full results are identified in Document 8.

The PROBE facilitator is also quoted in the overview document as having stated that:

The team went about the task in a committed and spirited fashion that demonstrates a will to improve the organisational excellence and add to the Best Value drive that [the Council] is pursuing.

Also included within the review documentation is a document dedicated to the comments of the people who worked in the Directorate of Strategic Policy and Generation, introduced with the following words:

This document introduces all the people in the Directorate. It introduces to the Best Value Inspectorate and to those who are consulted on or otherwise read the Best Value Review those people who deliver the Regeneration Service at [Organisation C].

This document recognises the contribution that those individuals have made to the delivery of the Best Value Review at a time of change and pressure. It therefore recognises

Chapter 7 Organisation C's Best Value Review of Regeneration

not only the hard work these service deliverers put in on a daily basis but the additional work they have undertaken to carry out a fundamental review of their service which challenges their very own existence. Finally the document recognises that despite the additional workload and pressure they have maintained very high standards of service delivery.

Where possible each member of staff has provided their own opinion of what they do or how they feel about Best Value.

A selection of these “opinions” is reproduced in Figures 7.3 and 7.4. I have included these extracts here because they provide a valuable flavour of the people involved in regeneration activities at Organisation C at the time of the Best Value Review, and of their attitudes and perceptions at that time. However, I must emphasise that I am presenting these quotations here as secondary data. I have selected from the data presented in the review documentation in an attempt to authentically capture the balance of positive, negative, neutral and somewhat ambiguous views presented there. However, my knowledge of the process through which these views were gathered and compiled for presentation in the Council’s submission documents is quite limited and very much “second hand”.

Figure 7.3: Opinions expressed by a selection of the people of the Directorate of Strategic Policy and Regeneration – Part 1: The opinions of the leadership team in the Directorate

Director of Strategic Policy and Regeneration: *The review has helped the Directorate focus its efforts on the needs of our customers and yet has also facilitated better Corporate working between service units. A task originally viewed with some scepticism and dread is now seen as a positive exercise in preparing the Directorate for the challenges ahead. I can not praise the staff too highly for their efforts.*

Head of Planning and Building Control Services: *I am personally committed to service excellence and continuous improvement. Managing the first Council services to achieve Charter Mark is evidence of this. In taking over as Best Value Co-ordinator at a late stage I have intended to develop this culture of excellence and continuous improvement. I have been impressed with the response of the people of this Directorate in progressing this review.*

Head of Community Safety, Acting Head Of Regeneration: *It's about quality and improvement. There can be no argument with the principle of Best Value. The review hasn't been easy but then again it's not meant to be. I think the process has made the Directorate stronger and more focussed. People have a better understanding of each others' roles, a more collective vision of the service we are striving to provide and now, a means of measuring our progress towards being the best we can.*

Graphic Design and Technical - Discipline Leader: *Providing a quality service, continuous improvement and the ability to adapt to change have always been the way of life with the team I work in - Best Value only reinforces that our attitudes and beliefs are well founded.*

Head of Inward Investment - Discipline Leader: *Having spent some time away from the Council I was impressed as to how far the Council and the Directorate has progressed in a short period of time.*

Valuation and Estates - Discipline Leader: *Best Value will ensure that we keep on side.*

Cultural Development - Discipline Leader: *The Best Value process has reinforced for me how all our units move collectively to contribute to achieving regeneration.*

Community Safety - Discipline Leader: *When I first read the initials for Best Value, B.V., I thought of "Bon Voyage". Well it's now nearly 12 months down the line and I am still thinking "Bon Voyage" but in a different context.*

Extracted from Organisation C's submission documentation for the Best Value Review of
Regeneration (2001)

Figure 7.4: Opinions expressed by a selection of the people of the Directorate of Strategic Policy and Regeneration – Part 2: The opinions of a selection of staff
Community Development Administration Assistant: <i>Honesty is the best policy so here is my quote – Best Value – I just don't get it.</i>
Community Enterprise Worker: <i>The BV Review supports my personal belief that a focused, quality, value for money service can be achieved by maximising staff qualities & engaging our customers through full & active consultation. As a team we're taking positive steps.</i>
Youth Strategy Officer: <i>As tasking as it may seem you can not deny its importance.</i>
Economic Development Officer: <i>I was so satisfied with the probing exercises involved in the Best Value process that I am genuinely looking forward to the prospect of what is to come.</i>
Administration Assistant: <i>My customers would like to see things settle down and some continuity and stability established.</i>
Administration Assistant: <i>BV gave me the opportunity to become a licensed EFQM Assessor.</i>
Administration Assistant: <i>I've no strong feelings about Best Value either way. However it puts us under the microscope and shows that we can and will improve an already good service.</i>
Valuation and Estates Officer: <i>Best Value will keep us ahead of the field.</i>
Principal Planning Services Officer (Development): <i>The Best Value Review has been of concern to many people, not least because of the amount of work involved. However, I feel it will be a worth while exercise, demonstrating that the Council is working well and looking to improve.</i>
Senior Planning Services Officer (Policy): <i>I just live with it.</i>
Senior Planning Services Officer: <i>Best Value moves me to work harder and faster and gives me a focus for my professional life.</i>
Senior Planning Services Officer: <i>It's taken an awful lot of hard work above normal duties but it's helped us identify where we really are & want to be. Hopefully we'll be better people because of it.</i>
Planning Services Officer (South): <i>Words can not express how I feel about Best Value.</i>
Principal Building Control Officer: <i>I hope that the time, effort and expense that has gone into the review is justified in confirming my belief that our constantly improving service is the best.</i>
Senior Building Control Services Officer: <i>I hope that this expensive exercise, which has affected frontline services, assists in driving improvements to a service which has shown its excellence through Charter Mark.</i>
Senior Building Control Services Officer: <i>Building Control Unit has always strived to provide an excellent Customer Service. The introduction of BV has greatly assisted us in achieving that goal.</i>
Administration Assistant (Building Control): <i>As the youngest and most junior member of the PROBE Team I was frightened initially by the exercise. As I became involved my fear turned to fulfilment as I was able to play an active part and understand what good practices we already have but how we could improve.</i>

Extracted from Organisation C's submission documentation for the Best Value Review of
Regeneration (2001)

Context for and beginnings of the PROBE diagnostic benchmarking process in "Regeneration"

The PROBE diagnostic benchmarking process which contributed to the Best Value Review of Regeneration was undertaken by a team of eight staff, all based in the Directorate of Strategic Policy and Regeneration and support units which provided services to that Directorate. The team, led by Bren, was "cross-sectional" in membership, including individuals with a range of different roles and levels of seniority in the Council's hierarchy – in other words, it conformed to the blueprint recommended by the managers of the PROBE benchmarking scheme, described as "a diagonal slice through the organisation."

The PROBE process followed a time of fairly intensive change, perceived by some of the research participants as a difficult time for the Council. Alex recalls that:

...the Authority had been through a really traumatic time, because they had three Directorates and it was a 'Triumvirate', they didn't have a Chief Officer... really, they were leaderless, and it was only after that realisation came about that things started to move, and we started with the Best Value Review.

Bren describes the early stages of preparation for the review:

.... it was very slow... We eventually agreed that we were going to do a joint review of all of our services which contribute to Regeneration... Planning and Building Control, our Regeneration Team, Economic Development Team, Inward Investments, our Asset Management Team, Graphic Design and Technical... quite a range of different services... Back in the '90s, we had the Planning Team who dealt with everything... but we realised... that we needed an Economic Development function, and that has grown into a whole Directorate... the services were all inter-related, some were in Economic Development, some weren't... but they were all contributing in some way to regeneration. Planning, for example, had to be positive, and quick, because we had this problem about investment going elsewhere... and... the route to getting the Charter Mark in planning [was] in not only achiev[ing] inward investment, but to say to our customers... including householders, 'You shouldn't have to wait weeks and weeks to get a decision.'

Initially, somebody else was going to coordinate the Best Value Review activities; but then that responsibility was passed to Bren:

...we did have a Coordinator, it wasn't going to be me, but we never made any progress... I expressed concern at one stage that, '... this is coming off the rails...' And that Coordinator went and moved on to do other things, which left us in the lurch... this was around April and we had to have the review fully complete by the end of July. That potentially was a monstrous task... our unit, which was Planning, had made significant progress, we had done a full Business Excellence Model Assessment to develop our improvement plan... to make sure we were prepared for [the review]... others hadn't... there had been very limited benchmarking, we had to address the issue of 'Consult, Compare, Compete and Challenge', and we set a tight timescale, we had to get this done in 16 weeks.

[We pulled] together a team of Members and officers, and set out what we were going to do under the 4 Cs. We had everything sussed, the principal issue ... was Competitiveness... there were two aspects to it - we wanted an external opinion. We challenged our service through quite a few different ways, and we looked at competition by writing to national organisations and regional, who could deliver those services, and just asked them, 'Can you deliver this? If you can, let us know how you would do it, what it would cost'... What we were unsure about, because work hadn't been done - we couldn't judge where we were in the country or internationally. We could show through our benchmarking activity where individual services were... we hadn't fully benchmarked right across the services ... and it was a holistic review... and we wanted to see how we could check our Competitiveness out... It was suggested through Lee that... Service PROBE would be tool that could show us that... whilst at the same time doing some diagnostic benchmarking about where we were... It didn't take me any convincing... I knew because we were going through the process of engaging staff that the process would be something that might be difficult for people, but we would get an open, honest assessment of ourselves... and it did fulfil what I thought it would do.

Bren's account makes it clear that Lee was influential in the inclusion of a PROBE benchmark within the Best Value Review process. Lee explains the background from his/her perspective:

...we went through Best Value legislation - 'Challenge, Compare, Consult and Compete', everyone was struggling with that... So we go to the Audit Commission and say, 'How do you do that?' 'Don't know - it's up to you.' All the legislation says is that Best Value says, 'All we're asking you to do is follow these principles but it's entirely up to you how you do it.' So I said, 'We'll apply the tools and techniques of TQM... We have to demonstrate to somebody who doesn't really know our organisation that what we are saying is true. And produce evidence... the only way we're going to do this is to have a scientific approach.' The second Best Value Review was Regeneration, and Bren was struggling with, 'How can I demonstrate competition?' ...and remember, it's 'Competitiveness'... it's how you compete globally or nationally. I said to him, 'PROBE will do that for you.'

Lee anticipated that PROBE could help Organisation C to overcome what he perceived as a lack of "Performance Indicators" (P.I.s) relevant to regeneration services:

And the reason why we thought PROBE was that you looked at all the Regeneration P.I.s and there were very few in place... I 'phoned around the country organisations and especially local authorities who were involved in Regeneration, 'How do you really show performance?' 'Oh, it's the number of funding streams we get in.' I said, 'Yeah, but you might get six or seven funding streams, but you might waste the money, so how do you demonstrate performance?' Couldn't get an answer from anybody! 'Phoned central Government, they couldn't give me the answer, and they said, 'But it's a good idea, we don't have any performance as such around Regeneration.' So I spoke to Morgan [local PROBE Co-ordinator]...and Morgan said, 'That would do the trick.' And (s)he went away and did a bit of research... came back to me, dead excited, (s)he said, 'Let's go for it.' I was a bit apprehensive because Bren is one of these who'll ask searching questions, (s)he's got to be satisfied that this tool will work. At the end of the process, (s)he was delighted, so I was delighted as well.

This wasn't the first time that PROBE had been deployed in Organisation C, of course. It had been used in its various forms on three previous occasions, in 1997, 1997 and 1998 respectively. Lee had been involved in these three previous deployments, and perceived that they had been beneficial:

...we'd agreed that when the opportunity arises again, we'll make sure that it happens... we sold it on the back of 'Bren, it will help you, support you'; '[Person W - former Chief Executive], it will put us on the map' - delighted!; 'Joe, it's continuous improvement.' Everybody is happy, everybody is comfortable with it.

Morgan facilitated the PROBE in Regeneration, and also coordinated the arrangements with the Council from the PROBE Partnership end of the relationship. Morgan was already familiar with Organisation C, having had some involvement in their previous uses of PILOT and PROBE. (S)he recalls that after Organisation C received PILOT feedback in 1997, they moved on to use PROBE and "used the output to initiate some fundamental organisation structural changes"; and that two people from the Council approached Morgan in April or May 2001 and asked, "How can we use this to drive ourselves through an improvement agenda?":

They'd identified that they had got some benefit... the Labour Government had come in, and they were moving from being based on efficiency measures by the Conservatives... 'Competitive Tendering', to something called 'Best Value'. And it was really Best Value that introduced a lot of 'quality' into the ratios... rather than just prices and straightforward numbers... We told them about the PROBE set-up... And they definitely twigged that it could help them with sorting out their Business Excellence agendas... they got information on... the 'European Business Excellence Model', and they'd... gone so far as getting, I would say, half a dozen people trained as Excellence Model Assessors. The two people who approached me were the TQM manager... and the Head of Planning. Planning, as a sub-section, belonged to the Directorate of Strategic Policy and Regeneration, and the more we talked, it was obvious to me that [Planning] were a bit ahead of the game compared with the other Directorates and sub-units within [Organisation C]. So there was something going on... they came back and said, 'Look, we definitely would like to do PROBE.'

Alex had received his/her training as an EFQM Excellence Model assessor, along with “about forty” colleagues, and sees this as the beginning of his/her involvement in the “Regeneration” PROBE:

We then looked at comparing and contrasting and so forth... I was given that task, to pull everything together and so forth, and look at the Best Value Review, benchmarking... and who we were going to benchmark with... using staff within the Unit... We looked at about half a dozen different local authorities to see how they were managing their services, so that we could compare... And at the same time, we were having meetings on an organisational level... we had a fairly dynamic person... who coordinated the whole Best Value Review. And one of the things that (s)he said that we needed to look at was this ‘PROBE’ process.

Alex confirms that (s)he has never applied his/her skills as an Excellence Model assessor “in anger” in a “full-blown” assessment, although “...Sometimes I’ve used it, without realising that I’ve used it, when I think about it now...”

The initiative to benchmark with other organisations through direct contact with them was the other type of “benchmarking” incorporated within the Best Value Review. These benchmarking activities did not live up to Alex’s expectations:

...We had visions of doing dozens when we first started, but because of staffing time, and financial resources, we couldn’t go beyond the immediate local authorities... We had targeted three, but we managed to visit two... The [exchange with] [Organisation AJ] was useful; in as much as they had some good practices there, which we felt should be adopted here. And the [Organisation AK] one, there were one or two items that they dealt with that we thought, ‘Well, we should be doing that’, and we fed that into the process.

Bren took the lead on engaging colleagues as members of the PROBE Team:

...we had about six services, so it was nice to get so many different levels in the different [parts of the Organisation] and a good cross-fertilisation of views... I asked people [and] they said, ‘I’d love to engage in it.’ We had no problem about people getting engaged, none whatsoever.

Bobby was one of the people who “engaged” as a member of the PROBE Team. Bobby worked in the Council’s Design Unit, which provided services to the Directorate of Strategic Policy and Regeneration:

... the Best Value Review was the starting point for our Unit. It was felt, because we provided a central support function to the Directorate, that we should be included in the review to see where the Unit stood at the time, in terms of service provision/customer satisfaction and where possible improvements could be identified.

Bobby recalls the time when (s)he first heard that the Directorate was going to engage in benchmarking using the PROBE tool. His/her initial thought was:

‘Oh, what the hell are we getting involved in this for?... We’ve got enough work without something else’... the review process was pretty hard going and time consuming. We are a really busy section, and it’s sometimes difficult to keep things going day to day without going through a Best Value Review. But, we knew all areas of the Authority had to go through the review process, and Regeneration was the next area to be looked at... We had meeting after meeting to decide on our approach to the review... who would lead in various areas, who our stakeholders were, what sort of relationship we had with our customers, how we should challenge ourselves, how we compared to other service providers. The PROBE exercise was another tool to assist in the Best Value Review process.

Bobby describes the PROBE Team as “...a pretty representative cut of the staff...” Alex, another member of the PROBE Team, describes it as a team of volunteers, all of who had completed training as Excellence Model assessors. (S)he acknowledges that this might have led to a degree of “like-mindedness” in the membership of the team.

Pat’s account of how (s)he came to be a member of the PROBE team is rather different, however, and doesn’t sound like “volunteering”: “... I’m sure I was press-ganged into going, because I’m a long term cynic of these things anyway...”

The PROBE process: how did the team complete the diagnostic benchmark?

The PROBE Team members describe a process of arriving at consensus regarding the 91 scores which encapsulated their input to the benchmarking process, and which became their input to the PROBE benchmarking database. In Bobby's words:

...questionnaires were given to individuals followed by two or three internal meetings prior to [Morgan – the PROBE Facilitator] coming in to examine how we had arrived at consensus scores... We looked at the various elements of the questionnaire and discussed where we thought we stood individually in terms of scores, and debated each section as a group until we agreed a consensus score for each category.

Pat outlines his/her recollections of the process:

... we had to come up with a consensus of how we felt the Authority had changed... whether they had Investors in People strategies in place, those kind of questions. And then we scored them... coming up with sort of a consensus answer. And then... Morgan came in. We had a discussion with Morgan... I remember having that as a presentation, showing us where we came plotted on the graph, in line with other kinds of businesses and services.

The process comprised several stages, described here by Bobby:

Bren gave the questionnaire sheets out a few days before the first meeting... to be honest, I didn't manage to get right through all of the questions. So a lot of the decisions on my scores were made during the meetings... Most of the categories were fairly straightforward – although... there were one or two 'stickers'... things like the 'openness and honesty' in the Authority... it was a bit of a difficult period because we'd had a lot of change at senior management level... [Person W] had taken over as Chief Executive, one or two of the senior management people left and I think generally, people were happy with the changes... There had been a lot of office politics... people were a bit fed up of the unrest and ready for a bit of stability... the long debate about openness and honesty was probably attributable to past management... So I think that's why we scored highly in the leadership category... because staff had confidence in the senior management even though it had only recently changed.

So, when the team first came together to discuss their individual reactions to the questions that PROBE was posing, was there unanimity about their views and scores? Not according to Alex:

Not when they first looked at it, no... There was discussion on most of the points that we looked at, but I found it a very useful means of coming to an agreement... there were some people who would discuss vehemently that their point was the right point, but once other people explained their reasoning behind their decisions, then, 'Oh, yes well...' - they could see a different point of view then... and ... the difference in the marking was not that great... even initially... Whether it was like-minded people, or not... I didn't go in that depth into thinking about it. I found it a good process.

Bobby, too, has positive comments to make about the PROBE process; but also some reservations. (S)he describes it as very time consuming, explaining that there were three team meetings, each of about three hours duration, plus individuals' time to complete the questionnaire and a full-day consensus meeting facilitated by Morgan. I speculated that the fact that there were three team meetings suggested that the team only got through about one third of the questionnaire at each (three hour) meeting - was this the case?:

Yeah, well it was quite a big questionnaire! [laughs]... when you get 91 questions, and 8 people with different viewpoints... I can't remember every question, but there were some that brought about a lot of discussion... it's sometimes difficult to get two people to agree in a local authority, so if you get eight people in a room trying to reach a consensus... Bren tended to lead initially, with his/her opinions of certain questions; and that drew other people. But as the meetings progressed people got comfortable with the process, and each other, and discussion came from all quarters quite readily... the meetings were open and we went through a lot of the questions fairly quickly where there was obvious agreement on individual scoring. Things like 'openness and honesty', and I.T. issues, provoked a lot of discussion... but I think we were all fairly comfortable with the consensus in the end. It was interesting, because you only see things from your own perspective.... until you're in a group discussion situation when you hear other people's perceptions of how things work... I can remember being persuaded away from my own line of thinking on certain things, and I hope others were persuaded [by] my arguments. I think they were.

Bren echoes Bobby's comments that the process consumed a lot of time, and feels that some of the team members found the process quite difficult:

... it was very hard for people, particularly... at the front end, the assistants.... the workshops that we had ourselves were very slow, and we had to spend a bit more time than what was suggested... But when we asked them afterwards... they said, 'I've got so much out of this approach that I know it was difficult but now that I've got into it...'

For Bren, the engagement of colleagues in the team process at the heart of PROBE was an important and desirable feature:

It was engaging people in teams, and it's very rare that a full blown Business Excellence Model [gets] people engaged at different levels... whilst we had done that as the Planning Service, we were trying to embed it into... other parts... [I] felt this was an excellent way to get that cross fertilisation of views... the process in particular, the discussion, then the facilitated approach where someone external comes and challenges you... and your ability to challenge other people... I think it was a question about inter-directorate service improvement teams ... 'Oh, we don't have any of those.' I said, 'You're on this team, you're on that team... What would you say those are?' 'Oh, those are improvement teams...' 'Yeah!' And often people would start to understand what they were actually doing... they didn't realise that what they were doing were firm parts of what an excellent organisation does.

Following the internal team meetings, Bobby explains, Morgan worked with the team for a full-day session, working through the questionnaire and confirming the consensus scores:

Morgan played the role that Bren [had] - leading discussion initially and prompting pretty much the same sort of debates we'd had at earlier meetings... I think we were, to quote the phrase, 'open and honest' about it, and I think Morgan realised we had genuinely questioned ourselves and weren't trying to pull the wool over anyone's eyes... Morgan continually questioned why individuals thought in a particular way, or why we had arrived at the score we had. And I got the impression that (s)he was quite happy with the results of our discussions and the consensus scores we had arrived at.

Morgan's first role, then, was to test the scores that the team had provisionally agreed, and their rationale for those scores:

... that's pretty much what (s)he was doing, there weren't any major changes to the scores. And that was probably due to the fact that we had questioned ourselves in-depth both at previous internal meetings and on the day Morgan came in to facilitate.

Morgan, the Facilitator, confirms that (s)he was impressed by the preparation that this PROBE Team did in advance of the consensus meeting on the "PROBE Day":

...they went through the whole process, did everything to the button - getting the team together; familiarising with the questionnaire; getting an understanding of what the questions were actually asking... produced a matrix of everybody's ideas of the scores... the process was well-oiled... they did have a very good team pulled together, exactly to the way PROBE specifies - 'cross-functional', and across the seniority levels.

Alex recalls some of the specific aspects of practice and performance that PROBE prompted the team to discuss:

...quite a lot of work [had] been done on the Vision Statement... there wasn't much contention on that, because most people had seen the vision... there were posters all over the council offices... Some of the people... thought there was very little employee involvement. Some thought that there was a lot. Those who thought there was little... came from a background where they didn't have the department and the team meetings. And those who scored higher, they did have the team meetings. And by the time we finished that exercise, the ones who didn't have many team meetings could see the value of exchanging information with your staff and getting your staff behind you, so it changed their outlook on the way that they should manage their own particular units.

Alex confirms that this was an example of individual team members initially suggesting different scores for specific aspects of practices not because they were expressing different opinions about the merits of the same practices, but because they had experienced quite different practices in the different parts of the Division and units in which they worked.

The PROBE feedback: what did the process tell us?

Bobby recalls that, once the consensus scores were confirmed, Morgan proceeded to input them to the PROBE computer model, after a short break the team reconvened to receive and discuss the feedback:

... Morgan was quite encouraging of our initial results, suggesting that we were likely to come fairly high in the rankings identified by PROBE and that (s)he was impressed with the way we had debated the issues.

The feedback also made a positive, encouraging impact upon Alex:

[Morgan fed] in the data that we were supplying, looking at data that was already within their I.T. systems, and seeing how we came on the - I think it was a 'scattergun' approach - to see how far along the level... we were. I can't remember what the wording was, but it was like... those who were in like a poor 'quartile' and those who were in the 'excellent' quartile. And we were well on the way to over half at that time, so I thought 'RIGHT, great!' And it sort of boosts your morale and your determination to get that little bit beyond... because they were comparing us, not just to local authorities, but to companies as well, so you could see how you fitted within the whole gambit of the economic structure within the country.

Bobby had a specific area of concern in mind from the outset, and hoped that the PROBE process would help to highlight it:

I had personal concerns about some I.T. decision making at corporate level which was impacting on the progress of certain elements of the Design Unit's workload, and was pleased to see others in the group had similar concerns. This was evident during discussions and also in the consensus score we arrived at for the Information Technology element of the questionnaire. And I hoped, when the results of the PROBE exercise were delivered to management and Members, their attention might be focused in this area.

The PROBE feedback report did indeed highlight “e-business” as the clearest of the identified “areas for improvement” - of all of the practices and performance areas that the team examined through PROBE, this was the score that lagged furthest behind the average for “local government”, and the average for the database as a whole. Bobby explains that this “finding” came as no surprise to him/her, and that (s)he saw benefits in the fact that it was so clearly pinpointed, because this could help to legitimise the arguments that (s)he and colleagues were already putting forward:

...as a unit we knew that I.T. would be a big player in anything we did in the future, as it would across the Authority, but because decision making at corporate level was not always as responsive as it could be, PROBE would be a useful tool to highlight our concerns.

Bren concurs with the view that the PROBE feedback was unsurprising; and sees this as a positive outcome:

...there [were] no surprises for us, which... was quite the opposite of being a bad thing... it [gave us] another opinion from the benchmarking that we needed to improve in those areas. It showed us, for example, in performance management we were better than some of our peers, but an issue about how we actually treated ourselves, our staff and our e-government side, that we were very weak.

The outputs from the PROBE benchmarking process were incorporated into the Council's submission documentation for the Best Value Review of Regeneration. The format and content of Organisation C's submission documentation was something of a departure from the norm, as Bren explains:

...a normal Best Value Review at the time was a typical sort of council document... like something that you normally put to Members. We wanted to produce something that was part and parcel of us, which was different... and we produced a file of ten documents... for example, a chapter each on the 4 Cs... the Competition [chapter] was principally on... the PROBE... [it] identified the rationale behind it, process, what the team was and the feedback that we got, the results... It was about an open approach to the service providers, and an independent view of Competitiveness.

The efficacy and impact of the PROBE process: did it “work”? What changed as a result of it?

Several of the research participants have clear views about the effectiveness of the PROBE process in Regeneration: how well it worked; what impact it had; what benefits (and, perhaps, less positive effects) have followed from it. Each of the participants who had been directly involved in the PROBE has something to say on these matters, but they are not necessarily unanimous in their analyses.

Alex, for example, comments upon two aspects of whether the PROBE benchmarking process had been “effective”. (S)he firstly confirms that in his/her view the feedback delivered by the benchmarking process provided an “accurate” representation of the strengths and areas for improvement of the Organisation at that point in time; then proceeds to comment on whether the benchmarking process has stimulated actions and improvements:

Where [the report] talks about ‘Weaknesses’... ‘Recognition and Rewards’, that’s been addressed. ‘I.T. integration’ - that’s been addressed. ‘Managing Moments Of Truth’ – yeah, warts and all, we talk about that now. ‘Influencing Suppliers of Workforce’ – yes, we’ve looked at that. And ‘Electronic Commerce’ - we’re now starting to pull everything together on our electronic ordering and commissioning and that sort of thing.

Alex’s comments neatly encapsulate two emerging strands of thinking about the effectiveness of the PROBE diagnostic benchmarking. Firstly, (s)he is addressing the issue of PROBE’s ability to accurately pinpoint areas of strength and weakness, and comparisons with other organisations; and, secondly, (s)he is commenting upon his/her perceptions of the impact of the benchmarking process upon the organisation, its practices and/or its performance. However, on this latter point Alex’s initial comments are a little vague. (S)he is not alone in this regard. As the discussions develop during my interviews with Alex and the other research participants who were members of the PROBE team, I ask them to comment upon not just the “effectiveness” of PROBE, but also upon its impact - what happened next?; what happened as a result of the diagnostic benchmarking process?: what

changes did it stimulate, if any? I have to work quite hard during the interviews to obtain answers on this point, and in some cases I have to press the participants to address it. There is a general readiness to tell me about what happened after the PROBE process and the Best Value Review, in the following months and years; but some participants need encouragement to address the issue of whether any of the subsequent developments occurred as a result of the benchmarking process. Alex, for example, is able and willing to further develop his/her thoughts about changes that occurred in Organisation C after the PROBE process and the Best Value Review, but I have to prompt him/her more than once before (s)he addresses the issue of "cause and effect" in relation to the impact of the benchmarking process:

The management structure [changed], for a start. And I think the political structure changed, because at that time you were also having national Government saying, 'The political structure has to change.' And then they brought out... the Local Government Act of 2000, where organisations had to re-think the way that they were going to develop and deliver their services. They couldn't go on as they were in years gone by, where it was the Local Authority that dictated and not the community... you can't sit in your little silos any more.

***Interviewer:** I think what you've just described to me is a lot of change that has happened, I guess in the time period between 2001 and now...*

Yes.

...The link I'm trying to make... I'm not sure how well it can be made... is between to what extent did the PROBE exercise itself influence any changes that happened subsequently?

The PROBE itself specifically... I don't think that would be the major factor in changing. It's a part. It's not something that can stand on its own and you think, 'Oh yes, I've done PROBE, and we will change.' It has to be part of something else... and I think that's why people look at it, not as the be all and end all of change, you know, it must be part of something else... the will of the staff to actually change. It needs that self-belief that it will change, and that you will get to a stage where you're really having some improvement.

Sure. So I suppose if I was playing devil's advocate, what I could say is, 'Well, in that case, the PROBE didn't make any difference, did it?'

It did in the way that I felt about things. And the way that... you need to come to some sort of consensus of agreement, that 'this is the way forward', otherwise people would just go off at a tangent and do their own thing... that collective agreement that 'this is the right way forward', and I think that's embedded in the Organisation now.

In summary, it seems that Alex's views on the issue of the impact of the "Regeneration" PROBE are that the "agenda" that the PROBE tool appeared to set is an agenda that has been addressed, albeit that Alex would stop short – well short - of suggesting that this agenda been addressed only because PROBE flagged up those aspects as areas for attention. His/her view is that PROBE has been a contributory factor, a reinforcing factor, in a broader process of developing consensus about the Organisation's direction of travel.

Bobby, too, addresses the question "how useful was the PROBE benchmarking exercise?":

Well that depends on how it is acted on, doesn't it?... the Unit had concerns about how certain corporate I.T. issues were handled, which had a bearing on how work was progressed in specific areas... It was hoped this would be highlighted by the PROBE exercise, not just from the Unit's perspective, but also from the Directorate as a whole.

Bobby expresses his/her belief that the PROBE process worked well in terms of building a consensus amongst the Team; and that it accurately pinpointed priority areas for improvement. However, (s)he is unable to identify any improvements which were implemented as a direct result of the PROBE exercise; indeed, Bobby told me, the main priority area for improvement which was identified through PROBE – the need for some major improvements to I.T. systems – has taken 4 years before improvements have been implemented, and this has only happened when it has become necessary in order to comply with statutory requirements relating to e-Government and public access to information. Bobby suggests that PROBE's clearest contribution was to bring some fairly obvious areas for improvement to the attention of senior officers and Members of the Council; but that at those levels in the Council the exercise was seen more as an opportunity to celebrate

success than as a call to action. (S)he thought carefully before responding to my question *“What benefit actually arose from the fact that PROBE was brought in? From the fact that that team was brought together, and you went through all that effort...?”*:

[Pause] That's a difficult one, because PROBE was part of the Best Value process, which had benefits. Best Value changed the way we did a lot of things. The PROBE exercise... highlighted issues, which, to be honest, were staring us in the face anyway. In the Design Unit we stepped up a gear on things that we felt were pressing issues. What the PROBE exercise did for us was bring our concerns to the attention of senior management in the hope that some real progress would be made in the areas we considered important... The PROBE report did reach senior management and Members because it was an integral part of the Best Value Review process and update reports on the review were given to management and Members on a regular basis. But, I think it was probably seen more as a feather in our cap to have recognition from the University that we'd gone through this process, and we'd come out with a pretty good result, rather than something that should focus attention on areas where improvements were necessary.

That emphasis notwithstanding, Bobby was clear that the PROBE process had highlighted some areas that required action. So the obvious follow-up question was, “Were they actioned?”:

[Long pause... and a chuckle] I don't think they were actually. There were big issues about electronic service delivery highlighted in the report, yet it took so long to get things moving. A large part of electronic service delivery was fairly and squarely in the lap of the I.T. unit, which we had no control over. And I'm sure [Person YY], who is the e-Government Champion, was making every move (s)he could to secure that situation at a corporate level... But there was lot of background information that could have been investigated at service level – we'd made inroads in certain areas on the data capture side of things, but there was still a lot of ground to cover. We knew whatever we were going to deliver electronically, we had to have electronically – you know, you cannot get out what isn't there!

Back office systems, particularly in Planning & Building Control, needed to be improved. That was highlighted in the PROBE report, it was highlighted in the Best Value Review, and it has taken a major amount of time to get things moving with such an important issue...

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We're about to introduce a new system now - that's less than nine months before these services have to be made available electronically. So in that nine month period we've got to introduce a new system, translate existing data, capture historic data, train staff, and web enable the service. That was highlighted four years ago. That should have been actioned much quicker than it has been, no doubt about it.

***Interviewer:** If I was going to play Devil's Advocate, I would say the PROBE exercise was very useful - a mechanism through which there was some recognition of how well the service was doing and the Council was doing... an opportunity to celebrate some success. It highlighted some major issues which you had four years to address, but actually it's taken you four years to address them. If I was playing Devil's Advocate, I would say, 'Yeah, but you would have got round to doing that anyway.'... the PROBE exercise, as you said, flagged up things that were obvious to you anyway... but they were obvious to you anyway, so....*

I don't think I was alone in thinking these things were obvious. The PROBE exercise did highlight them, [but] like you say it's taken four years to action certain areas of it... and we would have got round to them anyway. So even though things were moving at corporate level on e-government initiatives, little was being done on the Planning/Building Control back office systems that were needed to support electronic service delivery... that was made clear to senior management at a very early stage, and any responsibility for failure to deliver should lie with them.

Pat concurs with the view that the diagnostic benchmarking process delivered a realistic assessment of the organisation, a fair reflection of the PROBE Team members' views:

There was potentially heated debate, depending on which part of the Council you worked for, and which managers you had... at the time we had a particularly... unsavoury director... who I would describe as a bully. And it was quite interesting to hear other people's surprise at the fact... So there was certain debate, whereas other people in the Department did get on with [that person]... But on the whole, it was the message about the way the Authority was going and whether they invested in people, things like that... there was genuine consensus, because I think at that time there was a big push by the Council to invest in staff and do a lot of training, So I think what came out at the end of the day was genuinely a fair reflection of what people thought... I think everyone was going down the same path.

PROBE, then, may well have delivered an accurate profile of the Organisation's strengths and areas for improvement, but Pat is unequivocal in his/her view that the investment of time that was made in the diagnostic benchmarking process was not worthwhile:

[The time I] spent on PROBE was two days I was away from my desk, then I returned to my desk and I had two days' worth of work, two days' worth of 'phone calls which I then had to catch up. And if a member of the public, or a customer, [is] asking 'Where were you when I wanted this?' or 'Why hasn't this been done yet?', and you say, 'I was working on helping the Authority to become an Excellent Authority'... it's not what they want to hear... that's why I sometimes question why all these things are being done... It's fair enough putting a graph up on a slide show, or giving somebody a model; it doesn't really equate to somebody's day-to-day work. I always think getting together with different departments once you're actually in these situations does become quite enjoyable, and you hear other people's problems and all get together and it's a bit of morale boost. And you leave that meeting feeling better. But you can't really bottle that feeling to keep taking when you get back to your desk, and within a couple of days it's probably completely gone...

Interviewer: I don't want to put words in your mouth - but if this had been earth-shattering experience that changed the life of the Council, you wouldn't have said what you've just said.

Yeah.

So, reading between the lines, this might have been quite an enjoyable exercise, but it didn't make a huge difference in the long run. Is that a fair comment?

Well... we're down to the bare bones, so it's quite hard to see these things, I think, put into practice. Things are always going to be difficult, working in a local authority, because there's not the money, there's not the staff. So no matter what system you put in place, you physically can't deliver what the public conception of what a council should deliver is. So I always think it's a hard thing to do anyway. I don't think there's a model exists. That's always been my opinion. I always think I'm paid to work for the Council doing a specific job, not to go to these different kind of meetings to... come up with new strategies.

Bren's reflections on the usefulness and impact of the PROBE process focus on the confirmation and reassurance that the team could draw from PROBE's feedback; and on the way that PROBE helped Organisation C to demonstrate to the external inspectors that their Review of Regeneration had been thorough and had addressed the "Compete" dimension of Best Value:

And a big thing was, it tested us out. We had our own ideas of where we were, where we felt we needed to improve. We had done that through a number of ways... because we knew as just a matter of course, because that's the way we were... 'We're not doing this and we're not doing that.' PROBE firstly provided us with a lot of good evidence about where we were pitched against other organisations - not necessarily of a similar type because you couldn't... there is no information out there to do that - but it showed you where we were, it provided us with significant evidence of getting an independent view about our competitiveness, and that was fully accepted by the Inspector. The Inspectors into the CPA process fully supported the way that we had done it, which was very important... because not only did we had to prove whether we were good and whether we were likely to improve, we had to prove to the Inspectors that we had carried out the Review to the best of our ability.

...And it obviously came out of having that, if you like, that second opinion... we were able to prove through that that we had an external view about where we should improve... we developed an improvement plan right across the board and linked that clearly to PROBE. So we said, 'This is the work that we have done, this is what PROBE has identified as areas for improvement, this is how we are going to put those improvements into an improvement plan.' ...we did a whole series of diagrams to show the Inspectors where there was improvement... we were able to show exactly within each of the improvement plans where we had actually picked those up. So we didn't want just to write, 'PROBE, we've done that... it's shown to us that we are Competitive, it's shown us where it needs improvement, well let's just get on and get our improvement.' We wanted to show how we had used that. So we didn't use PROBE just as a tool just to get us to deal with just the Competitiveness, it was to help us actually improve.

PROBE's ability to introduce an independent, external perspective into the review process provided Bren with a solution to a challenge that (s)he had struggled with in the early stages of the Best Value Review:

...the benefits have been that it has hit the right buttons in terms of what we need to do to prove... an independent viewpoint of our Competitiveness. Because it was an issue that I had difficulty with. I was going to Lee and Cameron, 'How can I prove our Competitiveness?'... And I think if we hadn't used that, we wouldn't have had that independency and we wouldn't have had a good result... they would have said, 'There's something missing here.' Because, whilst we did a lot of benchmarking... it was more about process benchmarking. And that worked very well, but PROBE was about diagnostic. And it... made it more holistic...

Bren also highlights the impact of the diagnostic benchmarking process, and the broader Best Value Review, on the individuals who were involved. (S)he regards this impact upon individual members of staff as a significant benefit of the process in its own right:

People started to realise then how good they actually were... we did a self assessment, we said we were good and we thought that we had good prospects to improve, and that's exactly the judgement that the Best Value Inspectors reached. But sometimes people don't realise that they are actually performing very well, and I think it helped to encourage people to understand exactly what they were doing. And they got to understand aspects of the Excellence Model about what excellence was all about, and that gave a lot of confidence. It wasn't the only confidence builder, because when we had done our consultation, we looked at a whole host of different stakeholders, but we particularly had a group of stakeholders in what we called a Challenge Day, where we got everybody to engage in challenging our service on our behalf. And that was very positive as well... one of the pleasing things to me was the feedback that we got when we completed PROBE... it was really good to see that team come through that.... I think I've got a... [turns the pages of the Best Value Review document]... a quote from one of the people...: 'As the youngest and most junior member of the... PROBE team, I was frightened initially by the exercise. As I became involved, my fear turned to fulfillment, as I was able to play an active part in understanding what good practice we already had, but how we could improve.' Now that's an Admin. Assistant in Building Control.... that's a lasting memory for me... people did come out thinking, 'Oh, I really enjoyed that.' And how many times do people say they have really enjoyed work, in difficult

circumstances? So, apart from the Competitiveness and the benchmarking... it helped to formulate our improvement plan, it gave a lot of people an uplift. And for me and for my Director, it just gave a lot of confidence to go out there and say, 'This is where we are.' And when we were interrogated by the CPA Inspectors... we had done a holistic review, got the right amount of independency to it, and it reflected the work that we had done elsewhere on the Business Excellence Model. Because there's that good tie in... So it was very enlightening. And because of that, firstly I recommended that it was run in Housing, which they did, and... if I can affect it, I think it would be ideal for our Support Services.

Bren expresses some minor reservations about PROBE's suitability for local authorities: "there is a set of questions at the end which are not really relevant to local authorities, and we had to just make a view, 'Well they are not relevant', so we had to deal with that." Lee explains that, following the PROBE in Regeneration, the Audit Commission inspectors expressed interest in the idea of developing a "public sector" version of PROBE:

When the Inspectors came in we got 'Two stars, will improve'. And there's only three stars; so... everyone was openly delighted with that. The Audit Commission were so impressed with PROBE they said, 'Well, we wouldn't mind taking this forward, because as Inspectors we are asked about how you prove Competitiveness, and we can't give any answers, and you've proved it at [Organisation C], and we don't know how you've done it.' So that then went back to... at the time it was [Person T - at the Audit Commission], and we seemed to be making some progress. Then [Person T] left...

When PROBE was first brought to his/her attention, Alex initially had some reservations about its relevance; but over time these were replaced by a feeling that the tool was helping the team to develop a different perspective on the Council and its work:

When we first started with the PROBE, we weren't sure how it fitted in, because we were informed that it was more a private business tool, rather than a local authority tool. But as we got further into it, you could see that there were similarities with what you were trying to do and what local business and national business were trying to do. Because at that time, local authorities... they didn't think it was a business, but it is, at the end of the day; it might not be profit-making, but you've got to view it as a business. And I think that's one of the things that came out of the PROBE exercise.

On balance, Alex is clear that the PROBE process was worthwhile:

My feeling was that it was a useful tool - a visual tool... And for people who have got problems visualising things from written data, it was a good tool to see 'How far along the spectrum are we?', and 'How far do we need to get to get to that "excellent" stage?'

Les regards the "relevance" of PROBE as a strength - the fact that the subject matter it covers, and feeds back upon, is directly relevant to what (s)he perceives as the need for local authorities to become more businesslike:

...for the benefit of the tape, I've just opened this document [the PROBE report] at any page that it falls open - and it's got weakest and strongest indices - 'relationship marketing', 'innovative organisation', 'service standards', 'value orientation', 'business performance', 'organisational productivity', 'quality of leadership', 'new service development'... Now, they are all things that you'd expect to find in a business plan for a commercial business, but we haven't had that previously within local authorities. And that's really, for me, what this is all about.

Les states that (s)he believes that the feedback from the PROBE process was "broadly" an accurate reflection of the reality at the time; although his/her more detailed comments suggest that (s)he would take issue with some aspects of the findings:

In the document, it's talking about us being particularly strong in 'Performance Management' and 'Leadership', and I think we were at that time. That was the start of that process, we were about a year and a half in then, and... well, I don't know where we would have [scored] on Performance Management and Leadership before that, but it would've been pretty low. So there had been a huge shift on that. We were establishing clear values. Where perhaps I wouldn't necessarily agree with this... was that we had clear values, but they hadn't really evolved into clear priorities. So we hadn't really got there - there is a difference between the values of what the Council is about, and what its priorities are... But I would agree that the main strengths at that time were mainly in Leadership. I don't think we were particularly strong on Performance Management then, and I still don't think we're particularly strong... again it comes back to the 'buy-in', because on Performance Management, what you're

basing this on are the views of people like myself who have taken part. And I think on Performance Management it's sort of where you set the benchmark... where some people might think that the Performance Management is fine, it might not be high enough, really... I've got particular issues with Performance Management because I have to manage a lot of external funding streams...

That comes through in terms of driving improvements... [quoting one of the headings from the PROBE report] 'Service Processes' - our service processes weren't great at the time, they still need to be improved, no question about that... We've a fairly antiquated financial system. I don't actually think that the processes for decision making are as simple and clear as they could be. So there are things around that. You've got your 'increasing employee satisfaction through the cycle of virtue effect', and 'to improve customer focus.' Yes, there are issues remaining around that. And, this is a critical one for me: 'gaining a better understanding of customers and markets' - we were poor at the time, we're getting better, but again we're not switched on enough there yet. So as a final one you've got here 'improved management of performance, and people, and processes, with more meaningful measures and balances... using the balance scorecard.' Well we do use that now. So, we are getting there on some of that, but there were areas for improvement then, and in a lot of this... there still are now. We haven't cracked all of this by any stretch of the imagination. We've moved, we've improved, but we're still not good enough. So there's a lot of improvement to be done there... really, this was one of the first pieces of work in starting to tease out some of those issues for us.

***Interviewer:** Which implies that the fact of going through this process four years ago may have had some influence on the agenda which has been pursued since then?*

Yes. Absolutely.

OK. But there are no specific examples of that that spring to mind, looking back at this [PROBE Report]?; In terms of actions that you took directly as a result of the outcomes of that PROBE process?

Not personally, no... but as a Council, this feeds into how we develop our service plans, which actually drive the Council. The whole process has made us look at our processes and

performance management. This was one of the drivers behind looking at the FIOD³¹ model that we've brought in. I'm not saying it's the driver, but it's one of the drivers that's been brought in to that. It's one of the drivers behind us looking realistically about what our priorities are as an organisation. What we're actually here to deliver and, importantly, what we're not here to deliver, and starting to shift our performance to those priority areas. So I know it's kind of vague, but I can't honestly say that I came out of this and... said 'Right, we're going to do this...' It's been one of the tools.

From an external perspective, Morgan makes links between Organisation C's deployment of diagnostic benchmarking, the Organisation's commitment to improvement, and its achievement of CPA "Excellent Council" status. His/her involvement with the Council has continued and deepened since (s)he facilitated the "Regeneration" PROBE in 2001:

We did the facilitation... produced the report; and... Bren drove something out of that report... and began building up paperwork, reports, internal reports, for the Best Value Audit, which took place round about September of the same year. Now, one cannot say that PROBE informed results that the Auditors were finding, but it definitely would be informing certain processes that they were looking at. 'Oh, you do benchmarking', for example. And I don't think there would be any bulling it up, but they could genuinely say... that they were looking around and seeing what other people were doing etc., and they were learning quite fast.

...I was approached by the Audit Commission team members, three of them came to see me and spent an hour or so going over what PROBE did, what [Organisation C] were doing etc... it was early days, we couldn't really claim that PROBE had made any big impact, but things that I had seen that were going on in [Organisation C] were truly giving me a picture that the organisation probably... certainly at strategic management level, and major operational management level, had a mindset that they were... thinking Business Excellence; were thinking TQM; were thinking continuous improvement agendas...

Following on, in the next few months, they'd got over the Best Value... and the Councillors themselves were beginning to get involved with the Executive Officers in the business excellence drive. And they had, as councils do, various committees... and out of the

³¹ "FIOD" stands for "Fully Integrated Organisational Development" – Organisation C's "performance management framework"

blue I received an invitation to join the 'Partnerships Committee', as a sort of critical friend advisor on... the continuous improvement agenda. And over the period since... what I've seen... Councillors, they're all involved in this TQM stuff, and... they have a Councillor who is responsible for each of the major committees - and they have actually got now a Councillor who is responsible for what I would call business excellence TQM... They definitely have got a very good quality mindset, and it seems to me that it is quality with a meaning - to get 'what we do' sorted out, to the benefit of the people who live in [the area]. So they're partway down that journey... the main measure to me is... I can't say direct cause and effect... but, if you look at CPA results - you can detect how over a period of, let's say six years, [Organisation C] have got to the level now of being 'Excellent'... and they're quite chuffed about it... This doesn't mean to say that citizens of [Organisation C's area] are enjoying a high lifestyle now... but the fact is that they are using a quality thread throughout almost everything they do. The things I've seen happen, affected by quality thinking, is the reaching out into the process areas... they've begun to look outside the box of the public sector - they've networked, they've benchmarked in lots of areas... And it's taken six or seven years to get to this - if you think, they first identified, 'Hey, PILOT might have been useful' way back in '97, to 2004 being 'Excellent' on the CPA... they've got a lot more that they want to do, but still, it's kind of putting a time line on the things that have happened...

The cost of the diagnostic benchmarking process: does it deliver value for money?

Pat's earlier comments, about the days that (s)he spent away from his/her normal work to participate in PROBE, call into question whether the process delivered benefits that would justify that investment of time. In similar vein, Bobby volunteers the thought that Organisation C needs to weigh up the benefits of a process such as a PROBE benchmark against the costs of completing the process. (S)he describes "a fair old investment of time" in the exercise:

The same people seemed to be showing up at meetings for the Best Value Review, benchmarking, PROBE, whatever... So, yes, there was massive investment in staff time for the whole process, and certain people in particular were under a fair amount of strain.

The PROBE exercise itself involved two or three meetings to thrash out a consensus. Then the day facilitated by Morgan... I probably spent about a day going through the form, and then three meetings at something like three hours long... each meeting... some of the questions we went through fairly quickly, but some took a bit of thrashing out. So, say nine hours in meetings, then three or four looking through the form, that's thirteen... plus a day with the facilitator [Person M]... probably in the region of 18 hours... was something like the time I spent. And I would assume that the others did pretty much the same.

Bobby confirms that, by extrapolating this estimate to include all members of the PROBE team, the time consumed must have amounted to at least 100 person-hours:

[Plus] there are financial costs. I'm sure if someone sat and did a man hour count of time spent on things like PROBE, Best Value Reviews etc., the figure would be staggering, and the financial implications huge, as well as the workload implications. Whether and how you realise the benefits of that is open to interpretation. I think the financial cost of things like this tends to get swept under the carpet.

Reflections upon the PROBE process and the Best Value Review of Regeneration

I asked Bren, as the leader of the PROBE team and of the review as a whole, to think about the issue of the impact of the PROBE process from an additional perspective: "...if I was the Inspector who received the [Best Value Review] documents from you, and went through them, and I came back today... the next question I am going to ask is, 'Okay, so have those improvements actually occurred?' Can you answer that?":

Yes I can, because we've developed a framework to secure those improvements. I would be open and honest with you and say that we haven't achieved them all within the timescales that we set out to do; but we have incrementally and in different ways achieved the outcomes. We have had, for example, some significant shifts, the drawing in of Community Safety in particular and the way we deliver that service, and the way we have developed a business service, have come directly out of those improvement plans. The way the Council is moving towards developing their website and e-government are in accord with those improvement plans. We have set out to develop a human resource strategy; that's done. We have still got progress to make on a lot of the improvements in it, but it has set out the framework to do that, and we are continually reviewing that.

***Interviewer:** Can you tie those sorts of examples back into performance as opposed to practice? ...what you have explained there are a number of what I guess are practices that the Council have changed which came from this plan, which I assume will ultimately show up in performance in some shape or form?*

It depends. You can't measure all of our performances by specific indicators. In terms of achievement, it is difficult to mark it back just to this review. This review gave us the springboard to making improvements and the need to improve, in terms of our service. Since that time we have been hit by many changes, including CPA which fundamentally looks cross-directorate, but significantly in terms of regeneration and social inclusion, how the Council is focused on delivering. And a big aspect of focus in CPA terms is... regeneration... And we have been shown to be 'Excellent'. We know that right across the board we are not performing as an organisation, not in here, as well as we ought. But that's not as a result of this review... I couldn't hand on heart and say, 'Well, I can clearly show that our performance level now is a direct result of this', because there is so much water traveled... we had two

different Directors in the time... we are doing different things generally since that time, so the service has shifted...

...I can't clearly and scientifically say that that improvement was a result of that review or that improvement plan. The business service, for example, that has been set up in the last year, and it is significantly better than the organisation that was before it... And that had its roots in here [indicates the improvement plan documentation]... That's come, and that's made us a much better organisation and a much better economy. Now, you know... would that have happened if there wasn't an improvement plan? It may still have happened.

At a later stage in the same interview, Bren returned to the theme of the impact of the Best Value Review of Regeneration, and of the PROBE which contributed to that review, prompted by my comment that I had been told by people who were involved in selling and facilitating PROBE that they were sometimes asked the question, "Look, if we use this tool, will we get better as a result?" I elaborated a little on this, in the hope of encouraging Bren to say more about his/her perceptions of the impact, demonstrable or not, of PROBE and the broader Best Value Review at Organisation C:

***Interviewer:** And of course it is easy to say, 'Oh yes... you cough up your couple of thousand quid and you go through the process, twelve months down the line your customers will get a better service from you and you will be more profitable or more effective.' If I can just kind of drop that pebble in your pond and perhaps ask you to reflect on that for me. I am particularly interested in: are there circumstances under which the answer is, 'Yes, PROBE will help you', and other circumstances under which the answer is, 'Well, it might not'?*

[Long pause] It's difficult to say... [pause] if you weren't self aware, and you did PILOT or PROBE, and you got those results, then you built your improvements on PILOT or PROBE, solely, I wonder whether that would deliver the improvements that you really need... our improvement plan was also based on seeking the views of our stakeholders. And you can't build a service on the basis of an independent viewpoint about what...

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But I'm not sure... I think the importance of PROBE... it was... a piece of the jigsaw, of a holistic approach. And I'm not sure just using PROBE on itself would deliver the improvements, because you might be delivering some improvements which weren't necessarily to the detriment of things that you should have been, and your customers may then not see the benefits in the service because you are improving parts of the service that they don't want anyway.

Bren reflected further upon the circumstances in which PROBE might deliver some benefits, and those in which it might not. (S)he felt that Organisation C had reached a stage of maturity in its efforts to improve, whereby when an exercise such as a PROBE benchmark highlighted some areas for improvement, the organisation already had in place a culture and some improvement processes into which these "actions arising" could slot :

... I'll give you an example. I have been doing some work with [Organisation S], excellent council, a big council, in one of their departments, as a 'critical friend'... The way I went about that is by using the Business Excellence Model, and I use it the way I get the best out of it - it's light touch... I use a questionnaire, a sort of a business improvement driver, looking to get people's viewpoints, but talking to people, seeing, understanding. And what I saw there was that, there was not a culture of improvement. What we have tried to develop here [at Organisation C] is to make sure that it's part of your day job. Getting better, excellence, is your day job. And whilst [at Organisation S] there was a clear commitment to that, there was no evidence of it happening. There was no evidence of strong leadership getting involved in a range of customers... no staff appreciation of leaders taking them through, allowing them time to improve, seeing results and improvement. And despite it being an excellent council, I just did not see that level....what I got was defensiveness, sheer, 'What are you saying that for?'... you've got to be prepared to learn, and you have got to be prepared to do something about it. It's no good going through review if perhaps... that outcome might not be what you have got in mind... you have got to understand that and you have got to say, 'This works... this criticism is positive... you know, I'm not using the word "weakness", I'm saying "This is an area for improvement."' And I felt that that defensiveness was a barrier to improvement... because there's a lot of complaints that, 'We never get involved in improvement work. We raise improvements, but nothing happens.' So they [staff at Organisation S] agreed to [spend a day working as a group on improvement], and we started off with some positive thinking, just trying to get people firstly to understand that it

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wasn't just their boss' job, it was theirs. And it worked champion, and somebody said, 'Well if we are working in this way and thinking positively and looking for improvements, do you not think we are just kidding ourselves because the improvement will not happen.' And that's the very point... I said, 'Yeah. You cannot seek to develop improvements if you haven't got the culture to want to learn and improve, you have got to have that in place. And that is what today is all about.... trying to get you to think positively, the rest of the day is about you actually turning that into action.'

By the end of the day we had started on the improvement plan, based on the Excellence Model criteria, we had gone through that approach and by the end of the day they were working on it. Unfortunately the top guy came to close it off and [laughs] sucked all the energy out of it...

[In contrast] I've found that the organisation here - and it has taken time to embed - we respond... we might get upset about some things, and we might be defensive to try and convince people otherwise, but we will get on and we will do... I've had experience in the work that I have done there [at Organisation S] that that process is not embedded.

In Bren's view, the fact that PROBE was not adopted for another of Organisation C's Best Value Reviews contributed to a lower level of engagement and motivation among the staff involved in that review, as well as limiting the degree of independent, external perspective; and (s)he believes that this was detrimental to the progress and success of that review:

The other service review failed miserably. We had to go to the Inspectors and say, 'We are not making any progress... we don't think it's time to do this.' One of the views.... that you might take... is that that team declined... they didn't see any value in PROBE. Now I think that was a short sighted view to take. That [PROBE] might have helped them get together. It was Technical Services - there was Architects, there was Engineers. That process could have helped to get people motivated and engaged, and then getting an independent viewpoint behind that. I think that was probably the most significant aspect, that fulfilled [during the Review of Regeneration]... that extra piece of the jigsaw... It might have been more helpful to us if we hadn't already done our improvement plan. The value to us is that it rubberstamped it, it gave credence to the fact that we said that we should improve here, this is exactly what... PROBE says. And bearing in mind, the two things weren't connected really.

Individual teams and groups of other people had come to a view about where we wanted to improve. Our customers had pointed us in that direction... PROBE was different people from different groups of the organisation, who hadn't necessarily been involved in those processes, getting together with a result of producing exactly the same answers. Now that was crucially important, because it convinced us that we were on the right tracks for improvement and that we didn't have one or the other to depend on... our customers could be saying, 'Well, you know, you could improve here' because of personal gain. But it showed that there was consistency there...

There's two judgements in the Best Value Review: one is how good a service you are, the second one is the likelihood that you are going to improve. And the important thing is that we had a sound and robust improvement plan which was based on a whole series of aspects of where we were going...

Summing up his/her reflections upon the PROBE process, Bobby recognises the role that the tool played in focusing and facilitating the Team's discussion, but struggles to identify tangible benefits that (s)he could say were achieved as a result of that process:

I don't think we could have done a similar exercise without the PROBE tool. The questionnaire was structured in a way that picked up on so many cross cutting issues, and although we could have just sat down and worked through what we thought were our strengths or weaknesses, I think the questionnaire focused the debates we had and it also gave us a ranking score for comparison to other organisations from an equal platform... The PROBE exercise did what it was supposed to do and highlighted where we needed to concentrate our efforts... but there's not a great deal of point in having a Best Value Review or using the PROBE tool if at the end of it all the major issues aren't actioned.

***Interviewer:** Ok. So if I press you to pinpoint something which did change as a result of it, one of the items that was highlighted that was acted upon, could you pinpoint something?*

[pause] In terms of the PROBE exercise on the Directorate, or on the Unit? [pause] ... I would say very little was acted on until the last minute from a Directorate point of view, and I think the changes that did eventually come were a result of pressure to meet e-government targets rather than responding to the PROBE report.

Pat also remains sceptical about the beneficial impact of the PROBE in Regeneration, and indeed about the broader set of improvement-focused activities that are promoted and pursued within Organisation C:

As to whether things have improved since then, I don't know, because, as I say, things are getting tighter as regards funding for councils etc., and I still have this bee in my bonnet about the fact that we've created a whole department which seems to theoretically drive the Council, or is in charge of filtering through all these new regulations, organising all these different kinds of ideas and initiatives. Whereas I think the department would be better employed doing the work that a council is supposed to do.

Interviewer: And that's the Department of... is it 'Corporate Strategy'?

I think that's what it's called now... and it is a department which just seems to continually get bigger and bigger.

Alex, on the other hand, would not hesitate to recommend PROBE to other councils:

Interviewer: A final question for you. If I was sitting here today representing another council in another part of the country, and I was saying to you 'Someone's recommended to us that we use the PROBE tool...'

[interrupting] Definitely.

Right. Why? Why should I use it?

Because it's a useful way of finding out what you're doing, how you're doing, and where you're going to go.

Emerging findings

The rich data presented in this chapter contributes much to my research aim of exploring the role of diagnostic benchmarking as an enabler of organisational improvement. It is apparent that, between the research participants who have been directly involved in the Best Value Review of Regeneration, and the PROBE which contributed to that review, there is a range of views and perceptions with respect to the nature of the purposes which diagnostic benchmarking would be expected to serve; the priorities and emphases among those purposes and objectives; and the ways in which benchmarking has, or has not, fulfilled useful purposes. The key findings emerging from this chapter can be summarised as:

- ❑ It seems that the PROBE team members achieved a strong consensus about the scores that they awarded for Organisation C's practices and performance; and they all seem to have found the process to be a positive experience
- ❑ Views are more polarised, however, when the participants are asked to pass judgement on whether the considerable investment of time and effort that the PROBE involved was worthwhile; two members of the team are sceptical on this issue
- ❑ That scepticism arises in part from the observation that, although PROBE highlighted opportunities for improvement and action that were perceived by research participants to be "the right" things to highlight, and apparently brought these to decision-makers' attention; nevertheless, the desired actions did not follow, or followed only slowly and when it seemed that other pressures caused them to occur
- ❑ Another cause of scepticism is the feeling that time spent participating in the diagnostic benchmarking process was time spent away from the day-to-day business of running the Council and its services; and that this was part of an undesirable pattern of diverting resources away from what might be called "core" processes and functions, and into activities which some perceive to add less value, perhaps no value at all

- ❑ Several participants have commented about the cost of an exercise such as PROBE; and some have questioned whether the benefits derived justify the investment that has been made
- ❑ On the other hand, there is a strongly-held view that the use of PROBE delivered a clear benefit in that it helped Organisation C to convince its Best Value assessors that the Council had done a good job of testing its “competitiveness” with respect to regeneration services. It is clear that this was a primary objective for key players in the decision to deploy PROBE on this occasion - to enable Organisation C to demonstrate to its external inspectors, the Audit Commission, that it had thoroughly tested its own “competitiveness” with respect to the provision of services relating to regeneration; and that the same key players perceive that this objective was definitely achieved
- ❑ There is also a clear view that this and other deployments of diagnostic benchmarking have played a part in a long-term process of learning and culture change within Organisation C; there have been other contributory factors to this process, so diagnostic benchmarking alone has not caused or achieved these changes, but it has played a valuable role within them.

Chapter summary

This chapter has reviewed in considerable depth Organisation C's Best Value Review of Regeneration, and the part that the PROBE diagnostic benchmarking tool played in that review and in the developments that have followed that review. Through intensive scrutiny of this particular deployment of diagnostic benchmarking I have identified a number of important findings, which contribute substantially to my research aim of exploring the role of diagnostic benchmarking as an enabler of organisational improvement.

Chapter 8 Organisation C: reflections and summary of findings

The previous three chapters have “told the story” of Organisation C and its experiences that relate to diagnostic benchmarking, by firstly introducing the organisation and the fourteen individual research participants with whom I conducted twenty three interviews between November 2003 and January 2006; secondly, reporting and analysing Organisation C’s extensive experience of improvement, self-assessment and diagnostic benchmarking; and, thirdly, focusing in depth on one specific deployment of diagnostic benchmarking - the process, its outputs, its impact, its costs, and the participants’ reflections upon it.

In this chapter I will draw together the threads of this primary research, with the help of some additional reflections from some of the research participants, and some further data and analysis drawing upon Organisation C’s Comprehensive Performance Assessment and Regional Excellence Award assessment processes; and summarise the findings which arise from the data and my analysis thereof. This chapter is therefore a stepping stone between my case study of Organisation C and its experiences, and the following “Discussion, conclusions and reflections” chapter in which I will further examine these findings in the light of themes, controversies and questions drawn from the relevant domains of knowledge and evidence, and draw conclusions regarding the contribution that this research is making to the body of knowledge, by exploring the role of diagnostic benchmarking as an enabler of organisational improvement.

This chapter is structured in the following sections:

- ❑ Research participants’ reflections on some key themes
- ❑ Organisation C’s performance and progress - perspectives available via the CPA and Regional Excellence Awards assessment processes
- ❑ Summary of findings from the case study of Organisation C
- ❑ Chapter summary

Research participants' reflections on some key themes

Several themes have emerged particularly strongly from the data presented and analysed in the preceding chapters:

- ❑ the roles that can be played by diagnostic benchmarking models, and roles that they are perhaps less suited for
- ❑ the stage of maturity that Organisation C has reached, and its significance
- ❑ the Council's welcoming attitude towards external scrutiny, and its significance
- ❑ the importance to Organisation C's development over the years of a small number of particularly influential individuals
- ❑ participants' perceptions of the benefits that follow from the deployment of diagnostic benchmarking
- ❑ "learning" as a particular benefit which may arise

During our interviews, some of the research participants have provided further insights which are relevant to these themes, which I will report and discuss in this first section of the chapter.

On the theme of the roles that can be played by diagnostic benchmarking models and processes, Les suggests that they have been particularly useful to Organisation C as contributors to a process of becoming "more businesslike." (S)he elaborates, explaining the pressures to operate more like businesses which councils have experienced and are experiencing:

Historically, the Public Sector works in an entirely different mode to what the private sector does... It works to a different set of principles, through a different set of delivery mechanisms. But... the need to work more effectively, as a business, has grown. Now I think there are two sides to this... One is that there is pressure from Central Government for councils to be more effective as operating businesses. But the external funding streams almost demand it, so that's brought in a much higher level of requirement to evidence what the money has been spent on, what the outcomes have been, what the benefits have been, as a business would do it. A business isn't going to spend £x million without evidencing what the

Chapter 8 Organisation C: reflections and summary of findings

outcomes would be... until the mid-90s councils weren't bringing in external funding... But there wasn't the requirement also in terms of measurement of specific elements of performance... So effectively I feel as though in the last ten years, councils have been pushed more towards operating as a business.

...that involves a complete shift in the way people work, and you have to start unpicking the business and asking some fairly fundamental questions. And when you're doing that to a service that has evolved over decades, and has never really questioned itself before or talked generically about itself, there's a need for some help to do that. And these diagnostic tools, such as PROBE, have been useful in helping us do that... they begin to unpick the way that the different elements combine to make the total... elements such as leadership, organisational structures and practices... establishing priorities and, more importantly, non-priorities... councils aren't very good at establishing non-priorities... traditionally they've tried to be jack of all trades and not necessarily masters of very many...

So that's really where PROBE has come into it... [and] some of the other models as well. And they sit underneath the Best Value and the CPA inspections, which are asking exactly the same questions. Essentially:

- ☐ What is the service that you're providing?
- ☐ Why do you provide it?
- ☐ How do you provide it?
- ☐ Do you provide it in the most effective way possible?

All common sense stuff if you were setting up a private business, but that's not how councils have functioned previously... it has helped us to shift the way we think corporately, and to be... more effective in the way we manage our resources.

Les, then, believes that diagnostic benchmarking tools have played a useful role in the Council's development. The Chief Executive also reflects on this issue - does (s)he perceive that the tools have played a significant part?:

Yes... [but] I think possibly less so at the moment... but that is possibly because of where we are on this journey... there were a good number of staff who were trained in [the Excellence

Model], and a lot of the change, and our analysis of how good we were, came from that model. So there are an awful lot of people who are quite familiar with the EFQM Model. We then possibly looked to take it a step too far, and when I joined the Council we had build on it to develop something that was specific to [Organisation C] which was called the 'Fully Integrated Operational Development programme', FIOD for short, [which] was essentially the EFQM model but with some elements added on to it. And whilst, on the face of it, it makes sense, and it makes sense in its place, it became a bit unwieldy and a bit confusing, and I think we lost staff with it. And we have really pulled back from using and developing something that is as specific as that. I would say that we still... in analysing our performance, analysing whether we're excellent or not, we still use large chunks of the EFQM model. But I think we've moved away from calling things 'models' so much, perhaps because we're starting to be a bit more mature as an organisation in this area of work.

...very recently we signed up to go for the 'Investors in Excellence' standard, and we kicked off a process of going for a standard using a series of 'beta' workshops and the EFQM model. And to be honest we stopped it after a small number of them, because I thought, the management team felt, and our Heads of Service who were involved in them felt, that a lot of it was going over old ground that we'd actually... we actually knew where we were going wrong and were putting right. And it is a huge investment in staff time to pursue a standard through that sort of process. So we pulled back from that, because we felt it was actually imposing something on us, that really wasn't adding to the other work that we were doing. So you always have to be careful that... you can be reasonably developed in the tools that you've used and the results that they're bringing you, and my view would probably be that you need to build on where the organisation is at that time and you might decide not to use a tool of any sort, or to use elements of it, and perhaps not call it a tool, if that makes sense.

...the Heads of Service and the staff, I want to give them the feeling that we're actually continuing to build on what we've done and... not be going for 'this week's model'. Because there was a danger that there was that feeling with FIOD - we did miss the mark with it. And part of what I've got to do, and the management have got to do, is to have a vision of what we want the organisation to be and to get people to buy that vision and share it and respect it. And you don't get that if your Heads of Service and staff are thinking that we don't know the route that we're going on. So I think that's where we are at the moment. But I think they've been, at particular points in time, they have been a really useful part of the progress.

The Chief Executive's comments clearly indicate a changing role for diagnostic benchmarking tools and approaches - indeed, perhaps, a need for different tools and different processes - at different stages along "the journey". Perhaps the contribution that such tools can make is at its greatest when an organisation is at the relatively early stages of its journey? When it is at a relatively low level of "maturity" in terms of its approach to excellence and organisational improvement? Bernie's comments would appear to support these suggestions. While pointing out that (s)he hadn't been there at the time, (s)he expressed the belief that the use of models such as the Excellence Model and PROBE over the years was likely to have played a role in helping to create the current mindset and a set of attitudes and ways of working. Now that these were in place, the need for such models was, in Bernie's view, much reduced, perhaps no longer there at all:

I think it's a sign of maturity... I remember when Best Value first came in. I was working in [Organisation L] and they created a secondment opportunity. I was in Cultural Services, and they wanted a Best Value Officer to interpret Best Value and implement it... all the departments set up similar arrangements and we were all very unsure what Best Value was, what it meant... And we surrounded ourselves with a comfort blanket, a process, that's what we did. The reviews were bad, generally, because they were about doing the process. Now by year three, we did a review of libraries, and we got three stars for it because we didn't think about the process, we thought about the service and the outcomes... that is just my experience. It is to do with confidence and maturity, and I'm not saying for a minute that models aren't necessary or important... I mean we have to have a performance management framework in place, (a) to please the Audit Commission but (b) again, to check that we've got our corporate objectives going through every layer of the Organisation. So, I'm not knocking systems but I think that we, at the moment in [Organisation C] don't need to take an off the peg system, because what we've got is working, with the need for some tweaks...

...I was originally from a service delivery background, and you tend to think the people who make policy know all the answers... but in actual fact there aren't any answers. When you're in a corporate situation you have to interpret the world, you know, whether that's deprivation, what's happening with citizens, what's coming out from the Government... and you have to make your best call as to how you should respond to it... and there isn't a right answer. And the temptation might be to say, "Yeah the answer is that model..." But I think it's more important that you think about what your people need and all that type of stuff...

The Chief Executive describes what for him/her is another indication of the maturity that the organisation has attained:

...we recently brought in a motivational speaker... leadership three day course for our management team and all of our Heads of Service... by the end of the first day (s)he had decided to cut a lot of the second day's programme... it was clear that the work (s)he was doing with us... we were as one - if that doesn't sound big headed. In his/her first day and a half, on this programme that (s)he does with many organisations, was around vision and getting us to reassess where we were. And there were about seventeen of us, and (s)he did a series of exercises... one of them was quite stark in that (s)he asked us to write on a piece of paper what was the Council about. And all 17 went on the table, and we all looked at them, and they all practically said the same thing... (s)he and I spoke, and (s)he said, 'I'm going to cut tomorrow's session, I'm going to move you forward into the bits that you do now need.'

... I think that's what our staff had found with beta... we have to be really careful when we buy these things in the future - it's not just the physical cost, bringing this person for three days, which was expensive, but having our 17 most senior managers there for 3 days is a [big] investment... we shouldn't keep going back, because people get frustrated, and people were saying, 'Vision? We've got a vision, we all know...', and there's great ownership of it.

The notion that Organisation C has reached a fairly advanced maturity level is a recurring theme from several participants. Perhaps another indication is another recurring theme - that the Council has welcomed, and continues to welcome, external scrutiny of its practices and performance. Lee is very clear about his/her belief that this welcoming stance has been a positive influence on Organisation C's ability to improve over the years:

I'm talking about Investors in People ISO 9000, Charter Mark, Business Excellence Model... we've told all the staff... 'These guys are here to help us, they're a critical friend, we want to know what they honestly believe of us and if they think it, then that's their perception... And if that's their perception, what is the public's perception? So this is valuable, and this is really going to help us move forward.' So we never look insular now, we're always looking externally for external advice and support, hence the relationships that we've built up with the [local] University and various other organisations.

The Chief Executive explains an example of Organisation C's proactive stance to inviting and welcoming external scrutiny - the Council's involvement in November 2005, for which they volunteered, in the pilot project to test a new CPA inspection process:

[We were] one of six that piloted... on the principle that it's a model that [other councils] will go through when they need to... when either their performance has declined; or they've improved and they will be worthy of reassessment. So, as an Excellent Council, if we did want to rest on our laurels, which we absolutely don't, we may never have to go through this again... But I very firmly believe that independent external assessment really makes you critically look at yourselves, and it makes you improve. And I'm pleased to have come through this exercise that we put ourselves up for in what seems to be, touch wood, a pretty positive vein. But we might never have to go through this again. But the judgment of this Council, and what we said in the consultation, was that we firmly believe that every [council] should go through this... our view was that we wanted to be annually inspected as the others are, because we really believe that it's part of our improvement. And if the Audit Commission don't do it to us, we will have to buy it in from somewhere else. And when you are buying in or inventing inspection, do you ever get the same level of independence? I don't know. Do you take it as seriously, because the results aren't being published?

Another recurring theme during the interviews has been the importance to Organisation C's development over the years of a small number of particularly influential individuals. Several of the research participants have independently highlighted their perception that a few individuals have been disproportionately influential on the path that the Council has followed with respect to improvement and the pursuit of excellence. Alex, for example, pinpoints the Leader of the Council as one key influence:

We're fortunate enough to have a very good Leader, who's very astute and understands the way of the human frailties, and what needs to be addressed, and (s)he's still doing that now. There's not many people can do that role.

Alex also names several other people whom (s)he regards as particularly influential, including Bren and Lee. Bren, in turn, mentions Lee's key role, as does Cameron. Lee him/herself refers repeatedly to the roles of some "key people" who have made substantial contributions to Organisation C's progress and development. (S)he particularly highlights the contributions made by Person G, Bren and Joe; and also acknowledges his/her own perception that his/her own commitment and determination have exerted a major influence on improvement-related activities at Organisation C, including the adoption and deployment of diagnostic benchmarking. Lee attributes this partly to the freedoms that (s)he has enjoyed in the various roles that (s)he has played over the years:

...an expression that has been used quite often within the organisation, this isn't my wording, it came from [Person G] and people like that... is a 'free spirit'... Some people hate that expression and think, 'Who is (s)he to say "free spirit"?'; but some people see that as, 'Well this is very useful, because (s)he gets things done.' And I can honestly say I don't think I have been managed necessarily by anybody, and the reason for that is because I am off doing things and supporting the organisation, and I am creative and innovative in my approach, if you like... I am not trying to brag or anything, I am trying to be honest... I get things done, I am good at networking and that supports the organisation and also sells the organisation and promotes the organisation. So even if somebody disagrees with something like NLP, which they did, I still remain passionate about it. And we are now starting to see the benefits for that through the positive thinking group...

... So my role has always been one of, 'Let's look at ourselves inside out and outside in, and let's bring in some new ideas and approaches that will fit our culture'... you couldn't just bring someone, a consultant, and say, 'This will work for [Organisation C]'. I know the culture, and I know what will work and what won't work, and I know what is work risking and I know what is not worth risking... I am influential within the organisation, and I have the ear of some influential politicians. I am fairly well respected by some of my colleagues, one or two think I am wacky, off the wall. One or two have been quite bitter that I am this 'free spirit' – 'Who is (s)he? What's (s)he up to now? (S)he has reinvented him/herself somewhere else? (S)he has got insider knowledge.' Which I haven't, I create that knowledge myself... but that has never offended me... If I am doing things for the right reasons for the people that we represent and the people internally, then I am happy and I'm comfortable with that.

Morgan's extended contact with Organisation C over the years, as a PROBE facilitator, local co-ordinator of the PROBE benchmarking scheme, and as a 'critical friend' to the Council, enables him/her to offer a long-term perspective on developments:

...there's definitely been some synthesis of thinking, and... I would say that in 2001 - well even now, but certainly noticeable in 2001 - that different departments in Organisation C were at different degrees of maturity, or mindset, or distance along the journey... Bren's department and Bren's thinking and Bren's people were further down the line than, say, the Housing Department, or the Bin Emptying Department...

... I like to see measurement, like the CPA... they've hit 'excellent'... and they're quite proud of it. And the accolade to the inventors of diagnostic benchmarking is that they say they are giving a lot of credit to this particular process.

Morgan has facilitated PROBE in many other organisations and has played a role in the PROBE tools' development and deployment. (S)he is also an experienced EFQM Excellence Model assessor, having acted as an external assessor on the Regional Excellence Award scheme. (S)he is therefore able to offer a perception of Organisation C's experiences with and use of diagnostic benchmarking in the wider context of other organisations' experiences:

...when it comes to the use of this type of process, there are so many instances that I've witnessed where it's been done once and nothing's ever happened with it. You have an instance here... they've been assessed on how they're doing, how they've taken the quality view, how they've taken the quality approach. Joe Public might turn round and say, 'Well, we've got no more industries in the region, and another one's leaving us tomorrow', and things like that. So it's difficult, but... I've mentioned already what progress they've made over six or seven years, and I think the process itself has got to be nurtured, it's got to be oiled, it's got to be fed... it's got to be led by... it's so easy if the main drivers, I mean people, the people drivers in organisations leave, die, aren't there anymore, and it sort of wanes.

Chapter 8 Organisation C: reflections and summary of findings

But with regard to the benchmarking process, if it's used and it's used meaningfully and in a continuous way... I would say that I believe in it. Yes, I do believe in it! [laughs] I just wish a lot of other people would believe in it... I just have this feeling that... it hurts to improve, it's difficult to improve, and diagnostic benchmarking isn't necessarily... I mean it's nice to sit round the table... but it's not necessarily an easy thing... it's the front end of, 'This is maybe what you should be doing.'

I try to summarise a key point that Morgan had been making, in order to check my understanding:

...to read back to you what you've said in the last couple of minutes... I think what you are saying to me is, 'Yes, I do believe that Organisation C - let's put it this way - is further on in its quality journey, and has achieved more in terms of the excellence of its services, than it would be if it had never used PROBE.'

I would say yes, definitely yes... and I mean there's been 3000-plus PROBEs done, of all different types, in 30-odd countries. Now, I just have a hunch from a small amount of sampling that a lot of companies who do PROBE do it and forget it. Which is... a heck of a shame... more people don't do anything with it than do. But those who do do something with it, like Organisation C, do get a lot of benefit out of it.

...I think people who are competently using PROBE are... is 'proactive' the word? I have a feeling that... people wait 'til they're in the mire... organisations wait 'til they're not at the point of extinction, but they really have prods to say, 'Hey, we must look for some different way...', before they actually act... But I just think there's a lot more below the waterline... of companies who, even companies that do it, and they're still below the waterline... because my own experience of going back for fresh data from a database of companies who've done our PILOT scheme, and that's from '97... sad to say, some of them naturally have died - you know, births and deaths of companies - but some of them don't even realise they did a benchmark... I am saying this to try and give you the length of the rope between that mindset and the [Organisation C] mindset. [Organisation C] did it in '97, realised they did it in '97, realised that they could get some use out of it, and have done something with it - and they've moved on and on and on.

Lee, having reviewed drafts of the “case study” chapters of this document, reflects on the changes that have happened at Organisation C over the years, as described by him/herself and other participants in earlier chapters:

...where we’ve come from to where we are now, we’re a fantastic organisation compared to where we were ten or 15 years ago.

I ask Lee to elaborate on this theme, pointing out that, while several of the research participants have stated that Organisation C is a much better organisation now than in the past, this assertion is not apparent in the performance data that I have examined:

***Interviewer:** for instance, ‘I’ve asked myself, ‘Have the performance indicators got better?’...*

Not particularly... I think it’s the softer issues, and I don’t think it’s something that you can necessarily measure, but we have dramatically improved as an organisation in terms of trust, honesty... which I think are more important than some of the key measures.

Lee also reflects on the role of “tools” in Organisation C’s development: “The good news is that all tools work. It’s the people who use them that don’t work...”

In a recent conversation with a colleague who is new to Organisation C, Lee has heard the comment that, within the Council, “...there is lots of gloss, but it is not corporately embedded.” Lee comments that, “This makes me think about the EFQM Model - you can have a good approach, but that doesn’t mean it is well deployed, and reviewed, and embedded.” In Lee’s own mind, this is a fair comment - at times, Organisation C has done a good job of producing “fantastic glossy documents”, but they have not always been fully supported by substance to match the gloss:

Where it is deployed effectively - where it has worked and is working - is where there has been clear ownership below service heads... where we’ve done things through the “quality circle” approach. I’m finding things that we did ten years ago, with junior members of staff, still as embedded now... it hasn’t disappeared. Places like the Design Unit. They seem to

have grasped the concept, and continually improved. They've become better and better as time has gone by, and they're doing more with less resource, which is an improvement. And within that unit, there is now trust, and respect for some senior managers, where there wasn't before - and a feel-good factor of 'Let's do a really good job.' And they do do a really good job, the standard of the documents they produce, and the speed to produce them, is very professional. And there's credibility now for that unit. And the CPA inspectors commented positively about their work.

And another good example is the depots... for front line services - horticulture, refuse collection and so on... some of the work there is second to none... They still have quality circles, ten years down the line. None of the managers there do benchmarking, the staff themselves do benchmarking, and come up with ideas. They still have time off to look at issues and problems, and fix things themselves. That culture is still embedded. That was the only area I was allowed to get involved with initially, and there was a lot of work done there. There's a staff suggestion scheme, and we now have two front line staff who are directors of IDeA UK...

I asked Lee whether (s)he could link this "good work" that goes on in the depots with improved services that members of the public are receiving:

Yes... much better services. I'll tell you a story. Years ago, when we formed the first quality circle, we had a person who was so proud of the fact that... you had District Council weeds, Parish Council weeds and County Council weeds. We all looked at each other and thought, 'What's (s)he on about?' And what (s)he was saying was, 'Look at my weeds, there's no weeds there, I've taken all this council's weeds.' There was a particular area in the town where some land belonged to the County, some to the Parish and some to the District. We were right in the middle. So you had this perfectly beautiful patch, a weedless area, and on both sides... full of weeds! The Members were up in arms - 'Why have they not done this as well?' And it was as simple as that - this person was so proud - 'I've done my bit.' So we got the quality circle to think about his... 'We could work in partnership...' So that's the way it is now - wherever we can work in partnership to make it better for the residents, there's a philosophy of that within the depots.

Lee suggested that this example fed through into measures of public satisfaction with the local environment, which “have improved dramatically over those years.” (S)he described another example of the long term benefits of the improvement work in the depots:

Whenever we have to implement change... a good example would be the roll-out of the e-procurement software system - it went into the depots like that [click of the fingers to indicate that it was very quick], the problem areas we’ve experienced are with service heads.. and with support services, believe it or not. You would assume it would be simple, but in those areas we get 101 reasons why it can’t happen. Whereas in the depots, I hear, ‘No problem Lee, we can do this, and this...’ It’s about changing the way we do things, changing the business processes. Because they’ve got that understanding and that background, they’re ready to change... they’re very adaptable and flexible... The people in the depot are pressing for us to go one step further - ‘Can we integrate it with other software systems?’ Now, in the offices, we have to force the issue... Overall, as a result, we’re way ahead of the game nationally. So much so that we’ve been invited to give a presentation to the local government group, about how Organisation C have done this so quickly.

Lee described a system of “clans” that has evolved within Organisation C - networks of people that cut across organisational boundaries, linked by a common theme such as procurement. The person who is leading on policy and strategy on that particular theme directs the relevant staff’s work on that theme: “...separately from their service head. That wouldn’t be allowed in a lot of local authority organisations.” (S)he perceives this as another beneficial legacy of improvement-focused work which began more than 10 years ago, which have meant that the depots - which would be some of the most difficult places to implement change in many local authorities - have been home to some of the most impressive improvements in Organisation C: “...streamlined business processes, cost efficiency savings - tremendous efficiency savings in the depots, year-on-year... we’re ahead of target in terms of achieving 2.5% Gershon efficiencies, which would not be true of many other councils...”

I asked Lee to confirm whether the benefits (s)he was describing, arising from efforts invested in the Council’s depots some years ago, were in any way attributable to the

deployment of diagnostic benchmarking, as opposed to being attributable to other efforts to cultivate a philosophy of improvement.

Yes, we used PROBE in Environmental services. That's part of what's gone on there. It's been a catalyst of change. It got people around a table to discuss the issues. It got consensus of what the problems were. Things happened afterwards. But what we don't do very well is to take the findings of PROBE and say, 'We're going to do A, B and C within a set period of time.' We tend to use the PROBE workshop day to trigger other things and other issues.

Lee has recently learned that the senior management team has decided that Organisation C will not be continuing its involvement in the Regional Excellence Awards, following their disappointment with the Council's experience of the 2005 awards process. Lee is disappointed, but insists that (s)he does not experience frustration at such moments:

It's just that... to use the analogy, I've got a bar of gold, and I'm saying, 'There you are, come and share this bar of gold.' And people say, 'It's too heavy.' 'It's too shiny.' 'It won't fit in my pocket.' 'How do I spend it?' That's the frustration I've got.

Those participants who have been closely involved with diagnostic benchmarking at Organisation C have all described their experiences quite positively, in terms of the process being broadly an enjoyable one that delivered an apparently accurate picture of the Council's (or Directorate's, or Department's) strengths and areas for improvement; albeit that some of participants call into question whether the investment of time and effort has been worthwhile. Several participants have also asserted, in various ways, that benefits have followed from the Council's diagnostic benchmarking activities in the form of improved practices and/or performance; but, despite some sustained follow-up questioning on this point, between them the participants have pinpointed few specific improvements which they could say (or demonstrate) have occurred directly as a result of a diagnostic benchmarking process. Perhaps this has been a case of myself, as the researcher, "barking up the wrong tree" in terms of the nature of benefits that I have invited the participants to identify? Les would say so. Describing a major shift in the Council's culture in recent years, towards what (s)he would describe as a more "businesslike" approach - a shift which (s)he sees as necessary and positive - Les confirms that (s)he is convinced that the use of

PROBE and the EFQM Excellence Model have contributed significantly to these changes, and have thus delivered substantial benefits. Les does not believe that (s)he could pinpoint specific changes that have occurred as a direct result of the “Regeneration” PROBE benchmark; but this does not lessen his/her belief that the process was worthwhile and delivered benefits. (S)he suggests that the nature of these benefits is in the learning that individuals participating in such assessment processes derive, and the way this influences their thinking in their everyday jobs. (S)he describes what (s)he calls the “drip-feed” effect, which over time educates and shapes the thinking of those who work in the Council:

... I'll draw an analogy with the course that I've just been on, where we spent three days talking about various aspects of leadership... there was some fairly radical stuff on that – we were shown videos of the Red Arrows in training to fly jets, and we had the usual comments of, ‘What on earth has that got to do with me?’ But I think what happens is that you might take 5% away, if you're really into it you might take 50% away, or you might take nothing. It depends on how you approach it. And I think the same thing happens on this. You don't come away from being involved in something like PROBE and think, ‘Wow, this is going to change the whole way that I conduct myself as an officer within this organisation!’ I don't think many people come away and think, ‘This is going to completely change the shape of what we do.’ What it is, it is a drip feed. There is a common theme to all of this stuff that's going on. And it's all about moving towards business models, to operating as a business. And so you take elements of it away, and you might not do much with it until you come round to service planning, and then you start to build parts of it in. Now the effect that it has on different people will vary. There will be plenty of people who will sit round at a project like PROBE and take nothing away at all. That's because their minds are closed to it, they didn't particularly want to take part, no matter what you do it ain't going to happen. What's been interesting about this authority is that the percentage of people who have that approach are very much in a minority. Certainly within the upper tiers of management. And that's why you've had the huge shift that you've had, and why it's been such an interesting place to work for the past six years. Because either by luck, design or whatever, you've got a management team which is very open to change, and very open to move in the way that we operate, changing the practices that we operate... So I guess the answer is that it depends on what your perception of it is, and what your expectation of it is. There have been benefits from it. Certainly, I've had personal benefits, and the Council's had benefits as well. But it's one of several factors.

Les' comments suggest that the benefits that arise from diagnostic benchmarking are focused on some fairly subtle learning processes. We can contrast these benefits, which Les is convinced do arise in practice, with the more obvious benefits which might persuade organisations and individuals to commit to the process of diagnostic benchmarking. At face value, the proposition of a tool such as PROBE is that by investing 10 to 20 person-days of effort, an organisation will benefit through the compilation of an action plan, and will implement that action plan; and therefore if they measure their practices and performance again a year later with the same tool, they might expect their scores of 3 to have gone up to 4, and their 4s to have gone up to 5s, and so on. Perhaps what Les is helping to highlight is that these "obvious", or "face value" benefits represent a somewhat naïve view of what is really going to happen when a team goes through a process like PROBE on behalf of an organisation. A more sophisticated view, and perhaps a more realistic expectation, would be that the process of diagnostic benchmarking might stimulate some learning; and that this learning could be part of a "chipping-away" process that, over time, accumulates - supported by other influences such as (in Organisation C's case) leadership development work and involvement in excellence awards processes - and contributes to improvements in processes, changes in attitude, shifts in organisational culture; contributes, perhaps, to a process which might be described as "organisational learning."

Organisation C's performance and progress: perspectives available via the CPA and Regional Excellence Awards assessment processes

Before summarising the findings that arise from my primary research at Organisation C, I will examine the organisation's performance and progress from another perspective, in the belief that this will provide some helpful "triangulation", shedding new light on the data, the perceptions and the interpretations that I have presented so far.

The research participants have been unanimous in describing Organisation C as either an "excellent" organisation, or as an organisation that is seriously committed to achieving excellence and is on the way to doing so; or, at least, as "a really good authority." As evidence to support these positive views of the organisation, participants have referred repeatedly to the outcome of the Council's Comprehensive Performance Assessment, completed in March 2004, which designated Organisation C as an "Excellent Council" - the highest category in which a council can be placed via the CPA process. A closer examination of the Council's self-assessment for the CPA process, and of the Audit Commission's inspection report, might therefore be enlightening. Similarly, the submission documents and feedback reports from the 2004 and 2005 Regional Excellence Awards can offer additional insights to the Council's formal and considered self perception, the evidence that it can muster to support that self-perception, and the perceptions of external assessors after completing fairly intensive assessment processes.

Organisation C's submission to the CPA process, dated September 2003, is a fifty one page "Self Assessment" document, prepared (it states) as a collaborative process involving Cabinet Members, Officers and Trades Unions. It summarises the history of the Council in terms which are consistent with the accounts provided to me by the research participants, and describes developments in the Council's area since the early 1990s as a "renaissance". A number of completed major regeneration and redevelopment projects are described, along with an acknowledgement that the Council still has major problems to deal with, in terms of both physical and social regeneration. The document itemises details of these challenges, quoting statistics which make it clear that the residents of the area are somewhat disadvantaged in economic and health terms in comparison to national averages.

It describes the Council's committee and service structure, its partnerships, its financial context and aspects of its approach, highlighting its commitment to "continuous improvement", confirming that twenty nine staff have been trained as EFQM Excellence Model assessors, explaining the development of FIOD and describing the organisation as "...a learning Council."

In keeping with the nationally-defined format of CPA corporate assessments (Audit Commission, 2005; I&DeA, 2005), the self-assessment document describes "What the Council is trying to achieve" under the headings of the CPA "key lines of enquiry":

- ☐ Ambition
- ☐ Prioritisation
- ☐ Focus
- ☐ Capacity
- ☐ Performance Management
- ☐ Achievement in quality of service
- ☐ Achievement in improvement
- ☐ Investment
- ☐ Learning
- ☐ Future plans

For each of these "key lines", the document states Organisation C's self-assessment on a scale of:

- ☐ Strong
- ☐ Strengths outweigh weaknesses
- ☐ Weaknesses outweigh strengths
- ☐ Weak

I will not reproduce full details of the self-assessment here, or quote verbatim from the submission document, for fear of compromising anonymity (since CPA self-assessment documents are published documents in the public domain). Organisation C describes a

number of important lessons it has learned through peer challenge and assessment processes, including the need to develop an overarching strategy; to get better at prioritisation and at achieving and maintaining focus; and to comprehensively adopt and implement performance management. It also itemises a long list of “results and outcomes”, setting many of these in a context of comparison to national averages and benchmarks. In terms of “National Performance Indicators”, the document states that the Council performs “well” in comparison to other councils, with 14 indicators (29% of those for which comparative data is available) in the best 25% nationally, and another 13 being “above average”. Some areas are identified in which the Council has not yet achieved its targets, including a few performance indicators for which the Council’s performance has declined and is in the worst quartile when compared with other councils. The submission document also outlines the Council’s plans for the next stages of its development, focusing, among other things, on the need to build upon its identified strength in learning - the document states explicitly that the Council considers itself to be “a learning organisation” - by re-establishing its “Organisational Development Group” to support the sharing of best practice and ensure that learning is systematically built into management processes.

Having made this submission to the CPA process, Organisation C was assessed by Audit Commission inspectors and, in March 2004, received their Inspection Report, which recorded a grade for each of the CPA key lines of enquiry, and placed Organisation C in the overall “corporate assessment category” of “Excellent”. The report concludes that Organisation C:

- ❑ Is ambitious
- ❑ Provides strong leadership and works effectively in partnership
- ❑ Provides high quality services in priority areas
- ❑ Is self aware and open to challenge, and has learned effectively from its own challenges and experiences, and from others

The report notes that Organisation C’s performance is below average for more than half of the “Best Value Performance Indicators”, but suggests that the Council is achieving top quartile performance in some high priority areas, and that a large proportion of the BVPIs

in which performance is below average are indicators which are affected by “local factors”, with others being of low priority or based on relatively old data. Overall, the report awards Organisation C a score of 3 (out of 4), articulated as “strengths outweigh weaknesses”, for the key line of enquiry “Achievement in quality of service”, and for “Achievement of improvement.”

In contrast to the CPA assessment in 2003/04, Organisation C’s recent experiences of external assessment through the EFQM Excellence Model have not produced the desired result, given that the individuals who took the decisions to enter the Regional Excellence Awards in 2004 and 2005 did so in the belief that the Council had a good chance of winning an award. The feedback report from the 2004 awards (summarised in an earlier chapter) made it clear that the assessment team felt that the submission document might not be doing full justice to Organisation C’s processes, approaches and results, which did not come as a surprise to those who had been involved in putting the submission together and knew that the process of writing it had been rather rushed and much less inclusive than had been intended. The assessment team commented that Organisation C has been instrumental in driving excellence in its region of England, acts as a role model for other councils in its BVPI and CPA assessments, and is at the forefront of implementing new approaches. Their report summary stated that the team:

...were very impressed with the constancy of purpose in driving significant culture changes. The resultant culture was evident through the pride and passion of the people we met during the site visit in focus groups or just walking around coupled with the high level of involvement and innovation...

...The submission had to be written in a very short time and there may be a disconnect between the scores and comments of the assessor team (who had to base their findings largely on the submission) and the actual situation at Organisation C. Nevertheless, many of the comments will still be valid and it is hoped that they are useful in assisting Organisation C to achieve its vision... The very fact that Organisation C decided to go ahead with the submission reflects their desire and drive for excellence and they should be congratulated on this.

The assessment team highlighted a number of specific ways in which the submission document might not have done justice to Organisation C, suggesting that it:

- ❑ Appeared to confuse activities with measurable outcomes (by describing activities within the “results” section of the submission, perhaps at the expense of presenting results themselves)
- ❑ Presented limited evidence of trends, targets and benchmark comparisons across all of the “results” criteria
- ❑ Did little to demonstrate clear links between the results achieved and actions which had delivered and could improve those results

The decision to make a submission to the 2005 Regional Excellence Awards was taken with the explicit aim, expressed by the Chief Executive (and supported by the high powered delegation who attended the 2004 awards ceremony) of, “We’re going to win this next year, aren’t we?” The 2005 submission was compiled with the intention of learning from the 2004 feedback and submitting a document which would do full justice to Organisation C, and the 2005 document is certainly less descriptive and more results-focused in terms of the data presented under the headings of the four “results” criteria. However, the score awarded by the assessment team was similar to that awarded in 2004.

At time of writing (May 2006), I have not been able to see the 2005 feedback report or obtain further details of its content. However, it is clear from the Chief Executive’s comments in January 2006 that the feedback, and the manner in which it was initially delivered, came as a disappointment to him/her, and to others at Organisation C. Lee was able to confirm subsequently that the management team had taken a decision that Organisation C would not reapply for the Regional Excellence Award in 2006, and appeared to be calling into question the validity and relevance of the Excellence Model and/or of the Regional Award’s assessment process.

So, do these summaries of the CPA and Regional Excellence Awards assessment processes provide any useful insights which shed additional light on the findings of my primary research? At face value, they appear to be somewhat contradictory, with the CPA assessment process being consistent with (and, of course, to some extent informing) the weight of opinion amongst the research respondents that suggests that Organisation C has made substantial progress on its journey to excellence; whereas the results of the Regional Excellence Awards process appear to question whether that progress has been quite so substantial after all. Closer examination opens up the possibility of some different interpretations, such as:

- ❑ that the CPA process has been somewhat generous in designating Organisation C as an “Excellent Council” - a view that has found some support among a minority of the research participants
- ❑ that the Regional Excellence Awards assessment process has not done justice to Organisation C’s progress and current status - also a view that some research participants would support

The latter interpretation could be attributed to flaws in the Excellence Awards assessment process; and/or issues of the relevance of the Excellence Model criteria to Organisation C, and difficulties of matching its enablers and results with the detail of “what the model is looking for”; and/or to Organisation C’s processes of self-assessment and developing award submissions against the criteria of the Excellence Model having been unable to deliver a submission that does full justice to the organisation’s processes, approaches and results. These several possible interpretations are not mutually exclusive, and no doubt there are others that could be added to the list. I am not in a position to pass judgement on the “correct” interpretation, but will return to this theme in the subsequent (“Discussion and conclusions”) chapter, which will follow a summary of the findings which arise from my case study of Organisation C.

Summary of findings from the case study of Organisation C

I will now summarise the findings which emerge from the primary research that I have undertaken at Organisation C, my case study organisation. As a precursor to this summary of findings, Table 8.1 provides another reminder of the research aim and subsidiary questions.

TABLE 8.1: Aim of this research project

The aim of this research project is:

***to explore the role of diagnostic benchmarking
as an enabler of organisational improvement***

In pursuit of this overall aim, a number of subsidiary questions will be addressed:

- In deploying diagnostic benchmarking, what are the objectives and expectations of the various stakeholders?
 - To what extent are these objectives achieved, and expectations fulfilled?
 - Given the explicit claims of the proponents of diagnostic benchmarking that it is an enabler of organisational improvement, how would such improvement be expected to manifest itself?
 - Does organisational improvement occur in organisations which deploy diagnostic benchmarking?
-

Objectives, expectations and what is perceived to have happened in practice

It is clear from the data that a number of different “objectives” have influenced the stakeholders in decisions to deploy diagnostic benchmarking at Organisation C. It is also clear that individuals who have been involved in various different ways - in proposing that benchmarking should be deployed, in approving these proposals, in leading teams, in participating as team members, in facilitating the process, in being informed by the benchmarking outputs - have had a variety of different expectations of the process, some of which have changed over time; and have a variety of different perceptions of what has actually transpired, whether and how their objectives and expectations have been fulfilled. There is a range of views and perceptions with respect to the nature of the purposes which diagnostic benchmarking would be expected to serve; the priorities and emphases among those purposes and objectives; and the ways in which benchmarking has, or has not, fulfilled useful purposes.

Lee’s account of the initial decision to deploy the Service PROBE diagnostic benchmarking tool in Organisation C, which was made in May or June 1997 following Lee’s completion of the “PILOT” benchmark at an “Introduction to benchmarking” workshop, makes it clear that a primary objective for the key player(s) in this decision was to demonstrate to colleagues the value of a newly-formed corporate unit; and that Lee, who was one of those key players, perceives that this objective was achieved. Colleagues were impressed that the corporate unit was getting involved in “leading edge” activity such as the use of the PROBE tool. Lee also explains that the process of completing PROBE prompted the Director who led the team (Person G) and the other team members to focus on the task of developing an “organisational development strategy”; and that the PROBE feedback was used as an input to the shaping of that strategy.

Lee also reports that the next time that diagnostic benchmarking was deployed, Service PILOT in 1998, one of the objectives was to measure the Council’s progress - and that this was also achieved. The PILOT scores apparently indicated that some overall improvement relative to the previous (PROBE) scores - albeit that this is now difficult to

validate since no record of that PILOT benchmark is available. There is no indication from the research participants that, apart from this one occasion, the ability to measure the Council's progress over the years has been an important objective in the continuing deployment of diagnostic benchmarking.

A primary objective for key players in the decision to deploy PROBE on the second occasion (Service PROBE in "Regeneration", 2001) was to enable Organisation C to demonstrate to its external inspectors, the Audit Commission, that it had thoroughly complied with the Best Value requirements to "challenge" the current situation and to test the Council's "competitiveness" with respect to the provision of services relating to regeneration. The same key players perceive that this objective was definitely achieved; and that the external inspectors were apparently very impressed by Organisation C's initiative to deploy PROBE in this way, and took an active role in exploring the possibility of the development of a "tailored" version of the tool specifically for use by local authorities (and perhaps also by other public sector organisations).

The perceived effectiveness of PROBE in helping the Council to fulfill the requirements of a Best Value Review, as demonstrated in "Regeneration" in 2001, was a driver in the decisions to deploy PROBE again as part of the Best Value Reviews of "Housing" (in 2002) and "Environmental Services" (in 2003). Lee perceives that the Housing benchmark contributed to that review confirming a number of major areas for improvement, but that of the three PROBEs undertaken as parts of Best Value Reviews this was the least successful in terms of generating follow-up actions in the short term. "Housing" has since been through another external inspection which has confirmed that many of the same issues remain, and is currently the subject of an intensive effort to overcome these issues - a matter of some urgency because of financial implications which will be damaging if a follow-up inspection does not confirm improved performance.

A motive in making a submission to the Regional Excellence Award in 2004 was the belief that the Council might be able to win this Award. However, by the time the difficulties experienced had necessitated the submission of a sub-optimal document, the

key players in this decision were content to follow the process through for the sake of the learning that it would deliver.

Similar motives drove the decision to make a submission to the Regional Excellence Award in 2005; and it has been a disappointment to Organisation C that the outcome of this submission was perceived as quite negative in terms of the result and of the nature and delivery of the initial feedback

Those participants who have been closely involved in diagnostic benchmarking paint a consistent picture of the process being broadly an enjoyable one that has delivered an apparently accurate picture of the Council's (or Directorate's, or Department's) strengths and areas for improvement; albeit that some of the participants call into question whether the investment of time and effort have been worthwhile. Several participants have also asserted, in various ways, that benefits have followed from the Council's diagnostic benchmarking activities in the form of improved practices and/or performance; but, despite some sustained follow-up questioning from myself on this point, between them the participants have pinpointed few specific improvements which they could say (or demonstrate) have occurred directly as a result of a diagnostic benchmarking process.

Some of the research participants perceive that a range of benefits have followed from Organisation C's diagnostic benchmarking activities: "...team building, ensuring that all members of the team felt an importance, so even the more junior members... were being involved... being seen as part of the whole process"; "a catalyst" for some improvements; a "second opinion" and confirmation of priorities within existing improvement plans. It is not clear that these apparent benefits were a part of participants' objectives or expectations in advance of their involvement in benchmarking activities; however, expectations of these kinds of benefits may well have been, and may well remain, increasingly important over time as reasons for which decision-makers would choose to continue and extend Organisation C's deployment of diagnostic benchmarking.

It is clear that, among the research participants who have been directly involved in benchmarking, there are some reservations about whether the Council has reaped the full potential rewards for its efforts and investments in the approach. In particular, several participants have pointed out that the Council has invested in training a sizeable number of people as EFQM Excellence Model assessors, but that few of these people have since deployed their skills as assessors in practice.

It seems that, over time, some of the research participants - and perhaps other colleagues who are influential in decision-making at Organisation C - have come to perceive the benefits of diagnostic benchmarking as including a contribution to learning and people development; as well as (or instead of?) the perhaps more obvious benefits of pinpointing strengths and areas for improvement, and of demonstrating competitiveness or rigour in the review process to external assessors.

Les in particular has focused on what (s)he perceives as the usefulness of diagnostic tools in helping council services "...that [have] evolved over decades, and [have] never really questioned [themselves] before or talked generically about [themselves]..." to face up to these challenges, to ask themselves "some fairly fundamental questions", and to move towards operating in more businesslike ways.

Organisational improvement

The objectives and expectations, then, which have preceded and driven Organisation C's deployment of diagnostic benchmarking, have been partly about organisational improvement, and partly about communicating positive messages to external parties about the organisation, its current status, and its efforts to improve. What do the research findings from Organisation C tell us about ways in which any resultant organisational improvement might be expected to manifest itself? And about whether such organisational improvement has occurred?

The strongest evidence that Organisation C has “improved” consists of the participants’ recollections of the way things were at the Council some years ago, and how much better it is now as a place to work; their assertions that the Council now delivers better, higher quality services than it did previously; and the fact that the independent national assessor of public sector organisations - the Audit Commission - has conducted a thorough assessment of the organisation and concluded that it should be categorised as an “Excellent Council”; an accolade that has so far been reserved for a small minority of councils across the country.

Participants have described examples of areas within the Council in which services have improved, and/or internal processes of change and adaptability have improved, and made links between these improvements and diagnostic benchmarking activities involving those same areas at some time in the past. Examples include the Council’s Design Unit, and the depots which support front line services.

On the other hand, there is some contradictory evidence that might call into question how much “organisational improvement” has occurred at Organisation C. For example, in making its submissions to the Regional Excellence Awards in 2004 and 2005, the organisation has been unable to provide substantial evidence of sustained trends in key performance indicators that would substantiate claims that quality of services has definitely improved in recent years. And some of the research participants’ comments have directly called into question whether service performance is yet good enough to justify the “Excellent” designation - thus, by implication, questioning the extent to which organisational improvement has occurred. Comments have included:

- “...We need to improve our key areas of performance... there’s a lot that we need to build on...”
- “...[we are] well on the approach to excellence as an organisation. Perhaps that has been measured to some extent by the Audit Commission’s judgement that we are an ‘Excellent Council’... that news to us was great, but we knew we are not an excellent organisation... we have got miles to go...”

Broader findings relevant to the research aim

The findings summarised so far in this section directly address the subsidiary questions that I defined in advance - in deploying diagnostic benchmarking, what are the objectives and expectations of the various stakeholders?; to what extent are these objectives achieved, and expectations fulfilled?; given the explicit claims of the proponents of diagnostic benchmarking that it is an enabler of organisational improvement, how would such improvement be expected to manifest itself?; does organisational improvement occur in organisations which deploy diagnostic benchmarking? These questions, and the findings that address them, are central to my overall aim of exploring the role of diagnostic benchmarking as an enabler of organisational improvement; but some of the findings from the research which address this aim go wider than the subsidiary questions themselves. I will now summarise these “broader” findings.

A number of the research participants have described aspects of Organisation C which they believe to be relevant to the aims of this research; which they believe to be contributory factors, for example, to what they perceive as the organisation’s success, its progress, its improvement. Their comments have covered aspects such as:

- ❑ the stage of maturity that Organisation C has reached, and its significance
- ❑ the notion that the organisation has achieved a stage of maturity such that it can and should “...move away from calling things ‘models’ so much”
- ❑ the Council’s welcoming attitude towards external scrutiny, and its significance
- ❑ the crucial role in Organisation C’s development over the years played by a small number of committed and enthusiastic individuals; including the suggestion that the ability of one or more of these individuals to operate as something of a “free spirit” within the Council has been an enabling factor

- ❑ support for the idea that there may be a changing role for diagnostic benchmarking tools and approaches at different stages along “the journey”; perhaps even a need for different tools and different processes as progress continues. Perhaps the contribution that such tools can make is at its greatest when an organisation is at the relatively early stages of its journey? When it is at a relatively low level of “maturity” in terms of its approach to excellence and organisational improvement? It seems that Organisation C in 2006 remains committed to the deployment of the principles of diagnostic benchmarking and self-assessment, and that key decision-makers are convinced of the benefits of these approaches; but that the organisation has become quite focused and discerning in its views regarding where and when it will apply benchmarking approaches, and about which tools it will and will not adopt and deploy
- ❑ a suggestion that tools (and/or systems, and/or defined processes) can sometimes act as a “comfort blanket”; thereby potentially hindering engagement with crucial issues
- ❑ an observation that, in relation to involvement in a diagnostic benchmarking process (and/or in other developmental activities, such as training events), “...what happens is that you might take 5% away, if you’re really into it you might take 50% away, or you might take nothing. It depends on how you approach it...”; and that “...you might not do much with [what you have learned] until you come round to service planning, and then you start to build parts of it in...”
- ❑ a belief that, “There will be plenty of people who will sit round at a project like PROBE and take nothing away at all. That’s because their minds are closed to it, they didn’t particularly want to take part, no matter what you do it ain’t going to happen. What’s been interesting about this authority is that the percentage of people who have that approach are very much in a minority.”

- ❑ a suggestion that the Council has a management team which is very open to change, very supportive of efforts to improve; and that this is an enabling factor.
- ❑ a belief that at Organisation C the notion that *people are our greatest asset* is more than just a hollow cliché: "... the staff are much more open to risk and change and trying new ways of doing things..."; "... there was a hard core of people... that felt '...we want to make the world a better place... and we're not going to give in' ... we needed those individuals to come to where we are today..."; "...it was a few individual people who were pushing and promoting this, and the same few individual people exist today..."; "We've been assessed as having ambitions, skills in prioritisation, focus, skills in learning..."; "...it is about people, and it's about a cultural shift..."
- ❑ a view expressed by several research participants that Organisation C displays an openness to and welcoming of external scrutiny, and that this is a deliberate policy that has been a contributory factor to positive developments at the Council (albeit one that has not always been universally popular amongst colleagues at Organisation C: "...if somebody asked me one thing why we thought we were excellent, it is because we know where we are poor, and we know how we can address that to put it right, and we have got the courage and conviction to talk about it openly, decide on action and then work to deliver it."; "We convinced the Board of Directors to volunteer to have the first inspection in the country... and the positive stuff that's come from that has just been unbelievable."; "[The Audit Commission said], 'How is Organisation C like this, when the majority of authorities don't want to know?'; "...We'll always bring in an independent assessor to tell us really what we already know, as reality check." ; "... we will have to invent some sort of process for ourselves around self assessment, but also looking probably to bring in some form of external assessment and inspection, even if that is just to inform ourselves..."

Among the research participants who have been directly involved in diagnostic benchmarking processes, views are quite polarised about whether the considerable investment of time and effort that is involved is worthwhile. Where there is scepticism about the benefits, or about the cost effectiveness of diagnostic benchmarking, that scepticism seems to arise in part from observations that, although the process can highlight opportunities for improvement and action that are perceived by research participants to be “the right” things to highlight, and can bring these issues to the attention of decision-makers; nevertheless, the desired actions do not necessarily follow, or may follow only slowly and when it seems that other pressures cause them to occur. Another apparent cause of scepticism for some is the feeling that time spent participating in the diagnostic benchmarking process is time spent away from the day-to-day business of running the Council and its services. One research participant perceives this as part of an undesirable pattern of diverting resources away from what might be called “core” processes and functions, and into activities which some perceive to add less value, perhaps no value at all.

Conversely, there is a clear view from some participants that diagnostic benchmarking has played a part in a long-term process of learning and culture change within Organisation C; there have been other contributory factors to this process, so diagnostic benchmarking alone has not caused or achieved these changes, but it has played a valuable role within them; it has been “a piece of the jigsaw”. Some participants have apparently derived a lot of learning, and on-going confidence and motivation, from their involvement in diagnostic benchmarking; and some have completed the process with a better understanding of the organisation and their role within it than they had when they joined the benchmarking team.

Chapter summary

This chapter has drawn together the threads of the findings that have emerged from the primary research within Organisation C. It has employed some additional reflections from some of the research participants, and some further data and analysis drawn from Organisation C's Comprehensive Performance Assessment and Regional Excellence Award assessment processes, in order to set a context for and shed some additional light upon a summary of the findings which arise from the data and the analysis thereof.

The following chapter, the concluding chapter of this thesis, will further examine and discuss these findings in the light of themes, controversies and questions drawn from the relevant domains of knowledge and evidence, and draw conclusions regarding the contribution that this research is making to the body of knowledge, by exploring the role of diagnostic benchmarking as an enabler of organisational improvement. I will proceed to reflect upon the research process which has led me to these findings and conclusions, its successes, its challenges and its limitations; and to suggest some potential areas for further research, which might fruitfully build upon the research reported in this thesis and its outputs.

Chapter 9 Exploring the role of diagnostic benchmarking as an enabler of organisational improvement: discussion, conclusions and reflections

This chapter will draw together the findings that have been identified through the primary research case study at “Organisation C”, and weave these threads together with themes, controversies and questions drawn from the relevant domains of knowledge and evidence, in order to draw conclusions regarding the contribution that this research is making to the body of knowledge.

The chapter is structured in the following sections:

- ❑ Discussion of the findings from the case study of Organisation C and their relationship to themes, controversies and questions drawn from the relevant domains of knowledge and evidence
- ❑ Discussion of aspects of research methodology in the context of this PhD research, and the contribution that this research can offer to the body of knowledge relating to research methodology and methods
- ❑ Conclusions
- ❑ The contribution that this research makes to the body of knowledge
- ❑ Reflections upon the research process
- ❑ Suggestions for further research

Discussion of the findings from the case study of Organisation C and their relationship to themes, controversies and questions drawn from the relevant domains of knowledge and evidence

Within Organisation C, a number of different objectives have influenced decisions to deploy diagnostic benchmarking, and the individuals who have been involved have had a variety of different expectations of the process, some of which have changed over time. The participants also have a variety of different perceptions of what has actually transpired, and of whether and how their objectives and expectations have been fulfilled. This situation contrasts sharply with the descriptions of diagnostic benchmarking in the literature, which either state or assume that the objectives of diagnostic benchmarking relate directly to the identification of “areas for improvement”, and the construction of action plans to address these identified areas and thus improve the organisation and its performance. The literature makes it clear (Friedewald, 2001; Yasin, 2002) that the primary objective of diagnostic benchmarking is the identification of opportunities to improve an organisation’s enablers and results (or “practices” and “performance”); and the prioritisation, planning and implementation of those improvements. Several participants within Organisation C have asserted that such benefits have followed from the Council’s diagnostic benchmarking activities; but between them the participants have pinpointed few specific improvements which they could say (or demonstrate) have occurred directly as a result of a diagnostic benchmarking process.

Objectives which have influenced Organisation C’s initial and continuing deployment of diagnostic benchmarking have included: demonstrating the value of a newly-formed corporate unit; a desire to measure the Council’s progress (albeit that this appears to have been a motive on only one occasion); demonstrating to external inspectors that the organisation has thoroughly complied with the Best Value requirements to “challenge” the current situation and to test the Council’s “competitiveness” with respect to the provision of particular services; and a desire to win an excellence award, coupled with a belief that the organisation might be capable of doing so and that the process of applying and being assessed would generate useful learning. The literature identifies (Cole, 1999, p. 191; Keegan, 2001) as a function of diagnostic benchmarking the ability to assess progress over

time, and suggests that this might have been a rather more prominent motive than it seems to have been in this case. The literature does not emphasise the other objectives identified here, although some of the objectives that have been articulated suggest that Organisation C has undertaken what Bowerman *et al.* (2000) call “defensive benchmarking”.

In the course of pursuing these objectives, stakeholders in diagnostic benchmarking in Organisation C have found that a number of unintended and unanticipated occurrences have arisen, which could be regarded as “by-products” of diagnostic benchmarking; and which are generally regarded as beneficial outcomes. These have included a stimulus to develop an “organisational development strategy”, and an input to the shaping of that strategy; a team-building effect, arising in part from the interesting and enjoyable nature of the process; diagnostic benchmarking acting as “a catalyst” for some improvements; and the direct relevance of diagnostic benchmarking to the perceived need for the Council to become “more businesslike”. The likelihood of “by-products” of these natures arising from diagnostic benchmarking was not apparent from the review of the literature. These apparent benefits do not appear to have been a part of participants’ objectives or expectations in advance of their involvement in benchmarking activities; however, expectation of these kinds of benefits may well have been, and may well remain, increasingly important over time as reasons for which decision-makers would choose to continue and extend deployment of diagnostic benchmarking.

The participants in diagnostic benchmarking paint an almost entirely consistent picture of the process delivering an apparently accurate statement of the Council’s (or Directorate’s, or Department’s) strengths and areas for improvement. This finding addresses an important question not hitherto considered in the literature, albeit that the “accuracy” of the tool has largely been assumed (for example, Keegan, 2001). However, the study’s findings are also suggestive of an issue concerning the degree of challenge that different diagnostic benchmarking models present to the organisation. For instance, Organisation C’s Chief Executive has commented that: “...the appraisal system isn’t working as consistently as it might, but we’ve got the system, we just need to ensure that heads of service are working with it...” This could be an example of one of the key messages that the recent Excellence Model-based assessments have been offering to Organisation C - strong approaches that are

not broadly or well deployed, and/or are not subject to systematic review and improvement, will earn the organisation fairly low scores - typically 25 - 30% of maximum possible scores - within an award-style assessment. A benchmarking tool such as PROBE does attempt to offer the same challenge to the organisation - *are sound approaches well deployed, or only embedded in pockets?* - but a full-blown award-style assessment is better able to see through any well meaning self-delusion, and highlight for the organisation a common (but commonly overlooked) major opportunity for improvement - achieve full deployment of sound practices that are already working well in parts of the organisation, and you will have taken a sizeable step along your journey towards excellence.

On this point, the study has some resonance with the issue raised by Delbridge (1995, p. 322) regarding the tendency of some tools, including PROBE, to rely on benchmarking participants' perceptions of their comparative performance. Inevitably, there are trade-offs in choosing to deploy one or another diagnostic tool, with varying degrees of sophistication and resource intensity. PROBE and similar tools offer a testing challenge; award-style assessment processes offer a challenge which is considerably more robust. Conversely, PROBE makes itself available as a fairly prescribed and contained process which, while not trivial in terms of resource requirements could be regarded as relatively cost-efficient, depending on the view taken of the worth of the benefits achieved. Excellence Model-based awards style assessments will tend to require more resources, are more open-ended and are generally more "difficult" to complete.

Further, the study highlights that there are some inherent risks in deploying a highly sophisticated benchmarking tool and process, such as an award-style assessment, especially if the resources to complete the process thoroughly are not really available. There is a danger that it might do more harm than good in terms of its contribution to the organisation's commitment and capability to make further progress towards excellence; and that negative experiences might damage the credibility of benchmarking processes which have the potential to facilitate useful insight and learning. There is also a danger that credibility or motivation may suffer as a result of the sterner test and challenge that is inherent in a more sophisticated benchmarking process. If, for example, sound approaches are in place but are not well deployed, assessed or reviewed; or good results are being

achieved but positive trends or comparisons to peer groups can not be demonstrated; then a more sophisticated benchmarking process is likely to reveal these shortcomings, whereas a less sophisticated benchmarking process might be more forgiving of them. From one perspective, there is good news here: “If we can invest resources to do a thorough job of an awards-style assessment, we will learn even more than we have through other benchmarking processes, perhaps enough to help us break through to the next level of improvement.” From an alternative perspective, things look rather different, perhaps encouraging perceptions that the potential learning is not worth the required investment; that the exercise was a failure; and that the particular benchmarking model and process are not a good fit for the organisation.

The literature review identified gaps in knowledge relating to the costs of benchmarking (Dattakumar & Jagadeesh, 2003, pp. 191-192). This study identifies that in Organisation C’s setting the costs of a team-based diagnostic benchmarking process using a PROBE tool amounted to at least 100 person hours of time, plus the cash costs of commissioning the tool from an external source and the opportunity costs of the things that participants were not doing while they were involved in the benchmarking process. Some stakeholders are quite clear that the benefits which have followed would more than justify these costs; others are equally clear that they would not.

Another identified gap concerns the duration of benchmarking exercises, and a plea (Dattakumar & Jagadeesh, 2003, pp. 191-192) for “a method... to decide upon the total time involved in benchmarking exercises [which] would prove very helpful in setting targets and deadlines.” This study can provide no such method, but it does illustrate that the initiation and completion of a benchmarking exercise can be a drawn-out process, in this case taking more than two years from initial intention to deploy diagnostic benchmarking in a particular context, to firm plans for the process to actually take place in the near future. Anecdotal evidence from managers and facilitators of the benchmarking schemes confirm that this timescale is not out of the ordinary; and it is consistent with Friedewald’s (2001) observations of the elongated timescales of process benchmarking activities.

Over time, some decision-makers and other stakeholders in Organisation C have come to perceive the benefits of diagnostic benchmarking as including a contribution to learning and people development; as well as (or instead of?) the perhaps more obvious benefits of pinpointing strengths and areas for improvement, and of demonstrating competitiveness or rigour in the review process to external assessors. This finding is relevant to another gap in knowledge identified by Dattakumar & Jagadeesh (2003, pp. 191-192), relating to “Human resources in benchmarking activities”. It is consistent with and builds upon suggestions from several authors (Senge, 1990; Zairi, 1998; Voss, Ahlstrom, & Blackmon, 1998; Hermel & Ramis-Pujol, 2003) that there is a link between benchmarking and organisational learning.

The strongest evidence that Organisation C has “improved” consists of its people’s perceptions that it is now a much better place to work; their assertions that it delivers better, higher quality services than it did previously; and the fact that the independent national assessor of public sector organisations - the Audit Commission - has conducted a thorough assessment and concluded that it should be categorised as an “Excellent Council”. However, there is some contradictory evidence that might call into question how much “organisational improvement” has actually occurred, and there is a consensus among the research participants that, while it may have been labeled “excellent” and is generally pleased to have received this accolade, the organisation is not satisfied with its own performance and is focusing on improving it with the aim of better serving the needs of its residents and service users.

Several of the research participants have referred to the stage of “maturity” that Organisation C has reached, and see this as relevant to whether and how the Council will continue to deploy diagnostic benchmarking approaches. The literature provides a number of models of quality maturity, including Dale and Lascelles’ (2003) “levels of TQM adoption”. This model can shed some light on the stage that Organisation C has reached. It would appear to have moved beyond Dale and Lascelles’ third level (“tool-pushers”), at which the organisation would have been “forever looking for the latest panacea, for a quick fix”. Organisation C may have displayed this characteristic in the past, but there is now clear evidence of a thoughtful and considered approach, and indeed a willingness to reject

or discontinue the deployment of tools when it appears that using them will not deliver the anticipated benefits.

Dale and Lascelles' next level, labeled "Improvers", appears to have much in common with Organisation C. They suggest that Improvers (pp. 105-106) are organisations that have typically been engaged in continuous improvement for between three and eight years, and have made important advances, including developing an understanding that TQM involves cultural change. They are characterised by customer-focused continuous improvement, a commitment to TQM at senior management level, and to long-term and widespread education and training; and by trust, a focus on error-prevention and employee involvement:

A 'leadership' culture is starting to emerge, with some strong quality improvement champions... The preoccupation with 'numbers' is less marked than with 'drifters' or 'tool-pushers'... [and] The 'hype' which is usually associated with TQM is replaced by an acceptance of good management principle and practice.

Dale and Lascelles suggest that Improvers are characterised by TQM remaining dependent on a small number of key individuals to sustain the energy and direction of the improvement strategy. "There is a danger of lost momentum and failure to 'hold the gains' if key managers or directors leave... or organizational restructuring takes place..." Improvers are moving in the right direction and have made substantial progress, but still have some distance to go. A number of these characteristics are consistent with this study's findings about Organisation C, particularly the organisation's focus on good management as opposed to "hype"; and its apparent continuing dependence on a few key individuals. The warning from Dale and Lascelles to Organisation C, then, is that despite some substantial progress having been made, "improvement is not yet self-sustaining... In 'improvers' the more complex quality management techniques must be implemented carefully. They should be handled by employees who are able to understand them, otherwise people will be overwhelmed and the technique rejected." (pp. 106-107).

On the other hand, Dale and Lascelles' analysis might provide some encouragement to Organisation C that things are moving in the right direction. The next level up from "Improvers" is "Award Winners" (pp. 107-108), which "...have reached a point in their TQM maturity where the kind of culture, values, trust, capabilities, relationship and employee involvement in their business required to win [a national or international quality award] have been developed..."; continuous improvement is truly embedded and "total". They suggest that organisations at this level may well be practising TQM principles without labeling them as "TQM"; a point which resonates with Organisation C's Chief Executive's comment that "I think we've moved away from calling things 'models' so much, perhaps because we're starting to be a bit more mature as an organisation in this area of work." Perhaps Organisation C is already displaying some of the characteristics of Dale and Lascelles' level 5; but the study's findings suggest that it is not yet conforming to at least one of the characteristics that they describe - that the organisation will have moved beyond a dependence on the commitment and drive of a small number of individuals, reaching a point where all employees are involved in improvement; powers of decision-making have been relinquished by management; and TQM is viewed sincerely by all managers and employees as a way of managing to delight internal and external customers.

Discussion of aspects of research methodology in the context of this PhD research, and the contribution that this research can offer to the body of knowledge relating to research methodology and methods

As an unanticipated by-product of the research, I have obtained some fascinating insights into aspects of research methodology which have certainly represented substantial learning for me and may, I believe, represent a valuable contribution to knowledge in their own right - given that I have discovered limited coverage of these particular issues in the “methodology and methods” literature.

I have reflected upon a key question: “Have I led the research participants at all during our conversations?” I have tried not to lead them, but am conscious that, inevitably, it has happened to some extent. For example, the act of issuing a briefing paper in advance, however carefully worded, has communicated messages to participants about the subject matter I wished to hear about; and, possibly, could have led them to a view about what I “wanted to hear”. This latter effect could have been exacerbated in some cases, given that some participants were more aware than others that, wearing another hat, I have been deeply involved in the design, deployment and management of diagnostic benchmarking tools, including some that Organisation C has deployed. Further, there were occasions during the interviews when I made a judgement that I wanted to “dig deeper” on a certain point, by asking a question, asking a participant to develop a theme further, or reading ideas back to check understanding and stimulate further reflection.

For example, an exchange with one of the participants in an interview setting illustrates the point. This is an extract from Chapter 6 of this thesis:

I asked the Chief Executive what significance (s)he attached to this recent experience [of the Regional Excellence Awards assessment process], and the decision to ‘move away from using EFQM’, in the context of Organisation C’s long-term development. Did this, for instance, say something about the level of maturity that the Organisation had achieved?

The chief Executive's reply firstly covered some historical context about the availability of the Excellence Model before sector-specific models such as CPA were available; and then (s)he said:

...the organisation has matured to the extent that we'll probably move away from referring to having any allegiance to 'models' at all... we talked last time, about the problem of staff thinking that we were always just going for whatever was the new model at that time....

I can not be sure whether my introduction of the word "maturity" into this discussion influenced the Chief Executive to talk about the organisation "maturing" in his/her reply; but it is certainly possible that this was the case.

Although in all such situations I have tried to maintain a neutral and open-minded stance and tone, and to employ appropriate techniques such as open questioning, I acknowledge that my presence, my experience and world view, and my words and actions during the interviews and discussions have inevitably and undoubtedly exerted some influence on the participants' thoughts and words, and therefore on the data that I have collected; and, of course, on the way that I have interpreted that data. Having said that, I believe that the approach I adopted, and the manner in which I proceeded, were wholly appropriate to the circumstances and to the aim of the research, and had many positive characteristics that have contributed to my ability to fulfil the research aim.

As Nason and Golding (1998, p. 241) remind us, a researcher can not be a "fly on the wall" - they themselves are part of the research process, and must attempt to understand the impact on that process of their own philosophical bias and the "theory-laden nature of how they make sense of what they observe." I have addressed these facets of the research process partly through committing myself thoroughly to what Easterby-Smith *et al.* (2002, p. 59) call "self-disclosure", and explicitly detailing my involvement in the research (Kildruff & Mehra, 1997, p. 464) so as to make the impact that I have had upon the research as transparent and apparent as possible, both to myself and to readers of this thesis.

Given my job role in relation to various diagnostic benchmarking schemes, it was crucial that in the context of my PhD research I could “wear another hat”. In communicating with potential and actual case study organisations, I placed emphasis upon this need and found that, with careful planning and communication, it was possible to clearly separate and “distance” the role of researcher from any other roles. However, there were some specific challenges:

- At one stage, one of the research participants explained to me that an external consultant was to be brought in to the Council to project manage a Best Value Review. The research participant asked me to meet this consultant - pointing out that this would give me an opportunity to interview them as part of my data collection; and in the next breath, asked me to provide the consultant with a thorough briefing about the PROBE diagnostic benchmarking tools, how they were developed, how they are used.

...I think this is really important if you don't mind doing it... to give a flavour of, you know, your experience with [Organisation C] and what you feel... as a critical friend, to support his/her work. That would be really useful, but it also sort of engages you with him/her. (S)he would like to sit through a PROBE workshop with you as well, as an observer similar to yourself...

I felt obliged to say “yes” to this request, but I was concerned that this was going to create an additional difficulty for me in terms of being able to gather “clean” research data about the situation while at the same time being positioned as an active player sharing his knowledge of the organisation and of the tools. In the event, the consultant disappeared off the scene and the planned discussion never happened.

- On another occasion, the Chief Executive was explaining to me the management team's decision to discontinue the organisation's involvement in the Regional Excellence Awards. Quite suddenly, (s)he asked me “do you think that's right”. I was taken aback, and responded with a fairly incoherent reply to the effect that my opinion wasn't important, the Chief Executive and his/her colleagues were best placed to make that judgement.

On both occasions, I was concerned about the effect on the research process if I were to don the hat of a knowledgeable person on this matter with an opinion to offer - but that is one of the hats that I often wear, and these people knew that and were perfectly within their rights to ask me to make these kinds of inputs. On both occasions, I believe that the impact on the research data I have gathered was minimised; but I was unsure at the time(s) whether I had handled these situations in the best way possible. I believe that this raises an interesting and challenging ethical point for a researcher such as myself who is fairly well known to at least some of the research participants, and is perceived by them as something of a specialist or “expert” in the field which is the focus of the research. It is perhaps inevitable that during the course of a lengthy research engagement (in my case, over two years), these participants might, consciously or not, invite the researcher to wear their “specialist” hat. This researcher has experienced some uncertainty about how to deal with this - a sense of obligation to respond positively to the requests, bearing in mind the privileged position that I was enjoying in terms of access to people and data on an almost unlimited basis; a feeling that these requests were legitimate, and that it might be inappropriate for me to refuse them; set against an unease that to don the “specialist” hat would be to compromise my stance as a researcher who had explicitly rejected the option of engaging in action research or participant observation, but felt myself being drawn into doing so.

A further development of this same theme arises from Lee’s comment to me in September 2004, that in welcoming me into Organisation C to undertake my primary research, (s)he had been influenced to some extent by the thought that my research would provide an additional reason for one of his/her colleagues to decide to deploy PROBE again as part of a forthcoming review process:

...to be honest with you, why I was delighted that you said you wanted to do your research here, was that in a way you would be a catalyst as well for making that happen, because (s)he is going to be influenced, I think, by virtue of the fact that (s)he is helping you with your PhD. So it is never going to go away... even that alone, I think will force it along. However, you’ve [also] got Joe, you’ve got myself, you’ve got a few other officers of the Council who’ll keep saying, ‘What’s going on here? What’s happening here?’

This was a revelation to me, coming as it did nearly a year after I had begun to engage with Organisation C without realising that my presence as a researcher was expected to act to some extent as a catalyst to the very activity that I was there to observe. On reflection, I regard this as something of a salutary lesson, which serves to reinforce my view that, as Symon and Cassell (1998, p. 2) suggest, no matter how carefully (s)he tries to do so, a researcher can not “neutrally apprehend an external and independently existing social/natural reality.” Lincoln and Guba comment that:

The problem of subjectivity and bias has a long theoretical history... we are persuaded that objectivity is a chimera: a mythological creature that never existed, save in the imaginations of those who believe that knowing can be separated from the knower. (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, pp. 180-181)

I believe that my experiences at Organisation C can serve to add weight to this argument, and as valuable illustrations of some of the challenges faced by a specialist in a particular field seeking for the purposes of a research project to set-aside his/her knowledge and practitioner involvement and to “don a different hat” as a researcher; especially when working with research participants for whom the “specialist” hat is the more familiar one. They illustrate the point that another researcher conducting the same interview may not gather the same data; but this point is not unique to situations in which the researcher is a specialist in the subject area and/or known to some of the participants.

Conclusions

This study has explored the role of diagnostic benchmarking as an enabler of organisational improvement, in the context of a case study organisation, through the experiences of a purposive sample of staff and external facilitators of the benchmarking process. This organisation represents an “extreme” case in that it has made extensive use of diagnostic benchmarking over an extended period; which has enhanced the richness and depth of the research data available, and therefore the potential for valuable learning. The methodology employed has sought to authentically capture and report on the experiences, views and interpretations of the people who are best placed to understand the role that diagnostic benchmarking has played in this context, and to surface the meanings that their experiences and reflections hold for them, as a means of investigating and appraising that role.

The study has established that there is a clear and unanimous view among the research participants that Organisation C has improved over time; and that in making such a claim they can point to credible supporting evidence in the shape of “official” external perceptions of the organisation, and of widely-shared perceptions within the organisation that it has traveled far on its journey towards excellence. Diagnostic benchmarking is perceived by some who have been involved to have played a significant role in the organisation’s improvement; albeit that this view is not unanimous, and that the nature and extent of the role is somewhat contested.

Some who have participated in the diagnostic benchmarking activities believe that those activities have led directly to specific improvements, in the sense that practices or processes that required improvement have been identified through benchmarking, action plans have been drawn up, prioritised and implemented, and have resulted in improved performance. If this sequence of events has indeed occurred, then this can be taken as confirmation of the claims of proponents of diagnostic benchmarking that this is what will happen when the technique is deployed. A few specific examples of this pattern occurring in practice have been described, but in some cases participants who had asserted that it has occurred have been unable, when pressed, to describe examples. Other participants are clear in their view that this pattern is not what has occurred in their experience.

The objectives and expectations which have driven the organisation's deployment of diagnostic benchmarking have been only partly about organisational improvement. They have also been partly about communicating positive messages to external parties about the organisation, its current status, and its efforts to improve.

A number of objectives and motives have been apparent in Organisation C's decisions to deploy diagnostic benchmarking on six occasions between 1997 and 2003. These have ranged from a desire to demonstrate the value of a newly-formed corporate unit; to fulfillment of the Best Value Review requirements to "challenge" the status quo and to test the Council's "competitiveness"; to a desire to win a Regional Excellence Award. While there appears to have been a consistent theme running through all of the Council's experiences of diagnostic benchmarking - that theme being a desire to learn and to improve - nevertheless, the specific "trigger" that has led to each deployment of the technique has been rather more prosaic.

Some participants have persuasively articulated the view that the role of diagnostic benchmarking is less as a formula or roadmap, or directly as a means of constructing an organisation-specific version of such a roadmap or action plan; and more as a stimulus and aid to reflection and learning. It appears to have performed this role in this organisation as one of a range of influences that, together, have supported an evolution in the organisation's ways of working, a diffusion of a mindset which is increasingly oriented towards "continuous improvement" and makes the organisation a considerably more pleasant place to work than it used to be; and, it is argued, better placed to provide high quality services and to perform well against relevant measures of organisational performance, and to impress external assessors sufficiently that they have designated the organisation as an "Excellent Council". It could be argued that, in this sense, diagnostic benchmarking has acted as a catalyst to, and a vehicle for, organisational learning.

For a minority of the research participants, their experience of diagnostic benchmarking can be summed up as a waste of their time when they could have been getting on with their job. Neither they nor any of the other participants dispute that diagnostic benchmarking

produced a picture of the organisation which was an “accurate” and “fair” representation of reality, or that the process was interesting and somewhat enjoyable and produced a genuine consensus amongst the team members; but they would seriously question whether the time and effort expended were justified by the outcomes.

Despite the clarity with which its people perceive that organisational improvement has occurred, this study has not discovered persuasive evidence that Organisation C’s performance has decisively improved. Indeed, several of the research participants are clearly dissatisfied with current levels of performance, and determined that they will improve. While they are pleased to have been designated as an “Excellent Council”, they are not satisfied with the organisation’s current performance, and wish to earn the accolade of “excellence” from the residents and service users as well as from the organisation’s external assessors.

This inability to demonstrate outstanding performance, or clear, sustained, positive trends in performance, has been a contributory factor to Organisation C’s recent disappointing experiences with the most sophisticated and challenging form of diagnostic benchmarking - awards-style assessment against the criteria of the EFQM Excellence Model. These experiences may have had the potential to stimulate some valuable learning, but this opportunity appears to have been missed through a combination of the organisation struggling to commit the resources to the assessment process that it wished to commit, and perceiving that the externally-driven assessment and feedback process itself has perhaps been flawed; or perhaps that the sector-specific CPA model is now better-suited for use as an assessment framework within the organisation than a more generic benchmarking tool such as the EFQM Excellence Model.

This, and the organisation’s broader experiences of diagnostic benchmarking, illustrate some dilemmas for the technique itself and those who champion and support its deployment. There is clearly a relationship between, on the one hand, the time and effort that an organisation is willing and able to commit to the benchmarking process; and, on the other hand, the rigour of that process in identifying opportunities for improvements in practices and performance. A more sophisticated tool and more sophisticated approach,

such as the Excellence Model deployed through an awards-style process, has the potential to reveal more to the organisation in terms of opportunities for improvement and learning, but only if the assessment is completed thoroughly and skillfully, both by the team that prepares the submission and by the team that conducts the assessment and delivers the feedback. There is a danger that it might do more harm than good in terms of its contribution to the organisation's commitment and capability to make further progress towards excellence; and that negative experiences might damage the credibility of benchmarking processes which have the potential to facilitate useful insight and learning.

Participants believe that a range of benefits have arisen from the organisation's deployment of diagnostic benchmarking, including:

- ❑ People and team development, including the creation of trust and a communication channel between people who have been fellow members of a benchmarking team, and helping junior staff to attain an enhanced level of understanding of the organisation and their role within in.
- ❑ A catalyst for improvements
- ❑ Bringing known opportunities for improvement to the attention of senior management.
- ❑ Confirming, sometimes "rubber stamping", improvement priorities already identified in other ways
- ❑ A stimulus to and vehicle for learning; as part of a "drip feed" from various sources which has collectively made a positive difference to the organisation.
- ❑ A contribution to moving the organisation toward more business like ways of working.

Several participants have suggested that Organisation C has progressed to a higher level of “maturity”; and this has driven some thinking about the type of “model” that the organisation should deploy, indeed whether it should to some extent “back off” from espousing models as such.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from the study is that, in the UK public sector at least, sector-specific models are developing which have similarities to diagnostic benchmarking models; and in some cases are used as part of assessment processes that are mandatory for some organisations. Naturally, this can lead organisations to question the merits of undergoing multiple assessments using multiple models. This presents a challenge to the “generic” benchmarking tools such as the EFQM Excellence Model and PROBE, in terms of their uptake and continued deployment by organisations in some sectors.

The research methodology that has been deployed was not designed to support generalisation of this organisation’s experiences to other organisations, and no attempt at such generalisation will be made here. Having said this, the research has revealed no evidence to suggest that this organisation has characteristics which are somehow unique and therefore likely to result in diagnostic benchmarking’s role being markedly different here than it might be elsewhere. This is a question for other research projects to address.

The research has identified several factors which may have influenced developments in which diagnostic benchmarking has played a role; and may have influenced the nature and extent of that role. These can be described as contingent factors, in that the role of diagnostic benchmarking may be different, or may be more or less efficacious, contingent upon the presence, nature or degree of these factors, as described below.

“Experts” and proponents in the field of TQM and business excellence are virtually unanimous in asserting that senior management commitment to a quality-focused philosophy is a vital ingredient. It appears that such commitment is in place within Organisation C, and has been in place for a considerable period of time; and it is reasonable to surmise that this might be one contingent factor relating to the role that diagnostic benchmarking plays within the organisation.

The “quality” literature also suggests that, at certain stages of “quality maturity”, the continuing momentum and sense of direction of an organisation’s quality improvement efforts can be highly dependent on the commitment and enthusiasm of a small number of individuals. This would appear to have been the case for the organisation at the centre of this study. It is apparent that without the commitment, enthusiasm and resilience of a very small number of individuals the organisation’s deployment of diagnostic benchmarking in particular, and perhaps continuous improvement in general, might have faltered or been allowed to slip further down the corporate agenda. Thus the role that diagnostic benchmarking has played within this organisation can be said to be contingent upon the sustained presence and continuing commitment of a small number of “champions”.

The study has identified that this organisation has displayed, for a sustained period of several years, a willingness and enthusiasm to subject itself to external assessment, in the belief that by so doing it will benefit from alternative perspectives and learning opportunities that it would not otherwise have access to; and a proactive stance towards external assessments which it is obliged to undergo. This positive orientation towards external scrutiny may be another factor upon which the role of diagnostic benchmarking is contingent.

It could be argued that Organisation C’s orientation towards a philosophy of continuous improvement was a necessary precursor to their initial and continuing desire to deploy diagnostic benchmarking. Equally, this study reports a suggestion that the presence of an established orientation towards improvement - a “culture of improvement” - must be in place if the diagnostic benchmarking is to be effective in stimulating improvements. The presence of such an orientation may therefore be a contingent factor not only for a willingness to engage in diagnostic benchmarking, but also for a likelihood that diagnostic benchmarking will make a positive impact.

These several proposed contingent factors are not mutually exclusive or independent of each other; rather they may be seen as several different facets of a description of the organisation which might be summed up as “en route to organisational excellence”. The

literature suggests that, at this level of maturity, an organisation is better placed than at earlier stages to benefit from the deployment of improvement approaches and techniques, but that its continuing commitment to the hard work that is involved in their deployment remains vulnerable and over-dependent on the enthusiasm of a small number of champions. The study suggests that this description fits with Organisation C's current state, and that, while diagnostic benchmarking appears to have played a role in the organisation's progress to date, it may not yet have fulfilled its potential for contributing to that progress, and there remains the possibility that it will not do so.

According to several of the research participants, Organisation C prides itself on its open and honest culture, and its openness to external scrutiny. This perception is wholly consistent with my experiences as a researcher in interacting with the organisation and its people. As an experienced consultant, applied researcher and trainer, I am very used to visiting and interacting with organisations as an outsider; and therefore feel qualified to comment that I have rarely been made to feel as consistently (over time and across a range of individuals) welcome; and I have formed the clear impression that the views I was being given were given in that spirit of "openness and honesty."

I judge the chosen research methodology to have been successful in contributing to the achievement of my research aims, notwithstanding recognition of the methodological challenges encountered which have been described earlier in this chapter.

The contribution that this research makes to the body of knowledge

My review of the existing body of knowledge has identified that there is an extensive literature in the field of quality management and business excellence; and, within that broad domain of knowledge, a substantial body of work relating to benchmarking. In general, the literature has been dominated by practitioner-focused models, guides and case studies telling positive stories of success and achievement. There is a growing body of more rigorous and in some cases more critical work relating to business excellence (or “TQM”, or any of a number of other labels which are used to describe broadly the same set of ideas and approaches); but still a marked absence of such work relating to benchmarking. Further, as identified by Yasin (2002), little of the published work about benchmarking relates to benchmarking in the context of the “public sector”.

Within the benchmarking field, most of the published work relates to “process benchmarking”, leaving “diagnostic benchmarking” as something of a neglected subject. I have argued that the label “diagnostic benchmarking” should be taken to encompass processes of “assessment” based on one or other of the “models of excellence” (such as the EFQM Excellence Model or the Baldrige Framework), and by so doing I have broadened the scope of the relevant domain of knowledge and included a greater volume of relevant literature than if the study had focused entirely on tools and approaches that others might label as “benchmarking”; nevertheless, the published work that does exist consists mostly of sectoral or geographical analyses of patterns of practice and performance based on diagnostic benchmarking outputs; or case studies of organisational improvements in which it apparently played a part; or step-by-step descriptions of tools and how to use them, with exhortations to do so. There is a gap in the literature relating to the application of thorough and transparent research methodologies to the exploration of *how* diagnostic benchmarking operates, or the *role* that it plays; and this study has been designed to make a contribution to filling this gap.

This contribution is potentially of great value, given the relatively high levels of adoption of diagnostic benchmarking by organisations across many countries and sectors; its apparent potential to help these (and other) organisations to improve their practices and

performance; the costs of time and resources that are expended on its deployment; and the inability of existing published work to assist practitioners to understand the role that diagnostic benchmarking might realistically be expected to play in their efforts to facilitate organisational improvement. The challenges of understanding the role of diagnostic benchmarking, its efficacy and the factors that might influence that efficacy have not been adequately tackled, and until now the technique has attracted little scrutiny through the eyes of research methodologies that would be capable of meeting these challenges. Hence, this research has made an original and valuable contribution to the body of knowledge.

Through this study, the identified gap in the knowledge base has been addressed by subjecting diagnostic benchmarking to intensive scrutiny in a case study setting, to better understand its role as an enabler of organisational improvement. Through the eyes and interpretations of those who are engaged in its deployment, the role of diagnostic benchmarking is revealed to be less formula or roadmap, more stimulus and aid to reflection and learning. Its meaning for participants ranges from “*a gold bar that others won’t share*” to “*a waste of time when I might have been doing my job*”. The study concludes that diagnostic benchmarking has played a role as an enabler in this particular setting, and suggests contingent factors that appear to have worked for and against its efficacy in that role.

The methodology deployed was designed to maximise the learning about this particular phenomenon in this particular case study situation, and no claim is made of generalisability to other organisations and other circumstances. However, the potential contingent factors identified - features of the situation in this organisation at this time which appear likely to have influenced the role of diagnostic benchmarking, and may have made a difference to its efficacy in fulfilling that role - might be of use to others who are considering deploying diagnostic benchmarking in other settings, as prompts to their thinking about the role that it might play and about factors that might be influential; and, of course, to other researchers who might wish to replicate or build upon this research elsewhere.

This study also has a contribution to make to the literature about research methodology and methods, in that it has generated findings and conclusions that can usefully add to

published work on the themes of reflexivity, and of facilitating the anonymity of research participants in the context of an inductive, reflexive methodology.

Other identified shortcomings in the existing body of knowledge relate to the costs and timescales of benchmarking. This study contributes to addressing these shortcomings by subjecting diagnostic benchmarking to intensive scrutiny that reveals the nature of the costs and timescales involved, and indications of the scale of the costs in the case study setting. It also identifies more clearly than hitherto the true nature of the benefits, and potential benefits that can be generated through diagnostic benchmarking, thus providing a valuable input to attempts to better understand the cost/benefits balance and timescale expectations in relation to deploying this technique.

Given the popularity of the technique, the potential benefits it appears to offer and the anecdotal evidence that these benefits are seldom realised in full, this study's contribution to the body of knowledge is potentially of significant value to the academic and corporate communities.

Reflections upon the research process

Seven years is a long time in anyone's lifetime. There have been some momentous events since I "signed up" for this PhD research: 9/11, 6/6 the Millennium, the Sydney Olympics, the (second) Iraq War; Tony Blair was fresh-faced and a couple of years into his new job, and so was Alan Shearer. The face I saw in the mirror was a lot fresher too, and less hairy; and my kids were... well, they were kids, which they're not now. In terms of my professional life, I've been through some major changes, including starting a new job in 2004 which involved an almost complete departure from my previously very close involvement with diagnostic benchmarking. However, this did not in any way diminish my fascination with this PhD research, and I take that as a sign that the topic was well chosen. My first three-word draft of the research proposal was "Does benchmarking work?" It was a fascinating question then, it still is now; the literature didn't have the answer then, and if it has it now then it has escaped my energetic and (I hope) thorough searching.

The research has had its limitations, in terms of the scope of what it has been able to discover, the value of its conclusions, and the extent to which it has been able to draw upon all domains of knowledge and theory that might potentially shed additional light upon its findings and the conclusions that can be drawn from them. Those limitations arise in part from the inevitable limits to what can be achieved by one researcher in a defined period of time; in part from prevailing circumstances; and in part from the limits of my own knowledge and abilities in areas such as imagination, insight, time management, skills of interviewing, communication, analysis and writing. While acknowledging these limitations, I am confident that this research has been broadly successful, and has generated some useful contributions to knowledge relating to the role that benchmarking can play in organisational improvement, and relating to research methodology.

If I were starting the process again tomorrow, I would do some things differently, but the main features of the research strategy would be the same. The main lessons I have learned in this context concern timing and emphasis in terms of the effort that I have put into the various elements of the research study.

A major learning point for me that arises from the experience of gathering and analysing my primary data is the value of the “reflexive” approach. It is clear to me that, by returning completed transcripts to the relevant interviewees and inviting them to review, correct and perhaps elaborate upon them, I have heard things from them that I would not have heard if I had simply interviewed them and then analysed what they had told me. The cost of the reflexive approach was significant, in terms of the need to make transcripts presentable and intelligible to the participants rather than them just being working documents for myself, and the additional “administration”, communication and “chasing” involved in getting fourteen people to review and feed back about lengthy transcripts; but it was well worth it, not least because in several cases the act of reviewing their transcript prompted participants to volunteer further information and/or follow-up interviews which themselves yielded invaluable new data and insights.

An interview with Lee, on 17th September 2004, provided some insight into this particular participant’s perspective on this “reflexive” aspect of the research process. Lee had reviewed the transcripts of two earlier interviews, and volunteered the thought that they “...accurately reflect my views about PROBE [among other things]...”, but that the transcripts captured those views expressed in quite different ways than those in which Lee would express them “... if I was writing a report to ‘sell’ PROBE to colleagues within the organisation...”:

[The process of reviewing the transcripts was] very interesting... And it taught me a lot about myself.... I was concerned at one point that... it’s the way [Lee] sees it... and I suppose that’s important from your point of view. And I thought to myself, ‘Should I go back and write it differently?’... But something inside me was niggling and saying ‘Should I embroider upon that or should I not?’ And I thought, ‘Well, no’... if you understand where I’m coming from, then I’m happy with that... I’ve made some alterations where you had highlighted [queries]... There’s very few... whoever has typed this up has done a great job. They’ve also picked up the accent... and I found that hard, I must admit, when I was reading it through. I thought, ‘Should I change it to the way I think it should read?’ But then I thought, ‘No, let’s be honest’... and I’m thinking, ‘Do I really use that word? Do I talk like that...?’

Interviewer: And, in essence, you're happy with what you said as being...?

I'm very happy. I have been honest, as I think you'll appreciate... [but] anything that is in there, I've probably said before to my superiors and the politicians, so I'm not really concerned about that... I did read it, and I thought, 'My accent has come through...', and I thought, 'No, I like that, because that's me and that's who I am, and.... leave it as it is.'

Several of the participants expressed surprise, even dismay, at the style of what they saw on paper when they were invited to review their own words. One e-mail I received made this point quite forcibly: "I've redone the transcript. I must have been more hung-over than I thought when I spoke to you, and the [person] who typed it up must have thought you were talking to a baboon!" Others were less extreme, but shared the same concern about the way the transcripts read to them:

There are a number of areas (very small)... that I would like to change slightly. But before doing so, can I just ask you to let me know what use you are going to make of it. I expect it isn't, for instance, going to be a formal part of your work as it reads very badly - hopefully the discussion made far more sense!

As an aside, in the early stages of the process, I shared this discomfort when I saw my own words on paper. I, of course, had the privilege of seeing the transcripts first, and the opportunity to disguise my own incoherence before passing the transcript on to the interviewee. I did this on one or two occasions, then realised that this was a mistake - better to offer them the small comfort that, if they were concerned about how they were "coming across" on paper, at least the guy interviewing them wasn't coming across any better! On reflection, it is not, for most people, a common experience to have our style of oral communication presented back to us in the "stark" manner of a verbatim transcript. I found myself getting into the habit of offering reassurance to the participants even before they had seen their transcripts that, in this matter, "We're all the same... most definitely including me".

The timescale over which this research study has extended has been lengthy, almost exactly seven years from the day I registered until the submission date. It has been hard work and at times, like many other doctoral students before and after me, I have wondered more than once why I was doing this to myself; but I wouldn't have missed it, it has been a terrifically fulfilling process and I have learned far more than I could have imagined along the way. The process has been anything but linear, and very "lumpy" in terms of the progress and the workload. As Robson (2002) describes, it has been a "messy" process; and I should perhaps have been quicker to heed Miles' (1979, p. 590) warning that:

Qualitative data tend to overload the researcher badly at almost every point: the sheer range of phenomena to be observed, the recorded volume of notes, the time required for the write-up, coding, and analysis can all become overwhelming.

Miles' words are an accurate description of my experience during the data analysis and writing up phase, when I have at times felt completely overwhelmed. Thank goodness for a skilled and experienced supervision team, and a personal stubborn streak that kicks in when the going gets tough.

I found the task of what Marshall and Rossman (1999, pp. 152-153) call "data reduction" to be a considerable challenge, as I struggled with the balancing act between, on the one hand, providing readers of this thesis with the opportunity to experience at first hand the richness of the data I had collected, and to "hear" the research participants' voices; and, on the other hand, the need to reduce the data presented to manageable and reasonably concise extracts, and to apply appropriate levels of selectivity and interpretation in order to derive findings, synthesise arguments and arrive at conclusions.

On balance, I believe that the methodology and methods that I adopted have proved effective and fit for purpose; and that the unanticipated challenges that arose have been overcome or accommodated successfully. In the methodology chapter I described Symon and Cassell's "authenticity criteria" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Symon & Cassell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 2000) as "a means by which I, and others, can evaluate my research, and make judgements about the quality of the research design, and about the effectiveness of my implementation of that design". At this point, I can offer the following reflections:

- Having articulated the epistemological positioning which underpins my research (social constructionism), I sought to ensure that the research process would be fully consistent with and reflective of this stance - hence achieving what Guba and Lincoln call *resonance*. I have paid particular attention in this context to issues of *fairness* - ensuring that all available stakeholder views, perspectives, claims, concerns, and voices have both been heard (by me) within the data collection process, and are apparent in the text of this thesis so that they can also be "heard" by those who read it - and *ontological and educative authenticity* - ensuring that my research process has been transparent to and fully understood by the research participants such that, for those who have been sufficiently interested and motivated to engage in this way, the research process in itself might have been somewhat educative for the participants, and might have contributed to a raised level of ontological and social/organisational awareness. With the benefit of hindsight, I do not believe that I could have done much more to meet these criteria.

- I have also sought to ensure that my research process would pass the test of *rhetoric*, articulating the arguments that have arisen from the findings in such a way that they could be understood by my readers to be both strong and authentic. To achieve this, I have made every reasonable effort to reach participants and other data sources that would reveal multiple facets of the organisation's experiences of diagnostic benchmarking, and to provide opportunities for their voices and messages to be fully incorporated into the findings, interpretations, conclusions and arguments that I have put forward as arising from the research.

- The criterion of *empowerment* requires that readers of this thesis should learn something from reading the findings and conclusions that will enable them to take action. I believe that the issue of empowerment applies to the research participants as well as other readers. This study was not designed to be “action research” as such, in that it did not set out to facilitate changes and to study their effects. Nevertheless, I feel that this research has the potential to empower both the research participants and their colleagues at Organisation C, and other readers of this thesis, in that its findings and conclusions can be instructive and useful to them as they reflect upon their experiences and perceptions of diagnostic benchmarking, and contemplate future actions.
- I have tried to ensure that the research findings are *applicable*, in that readers will be able to apply them to their own contexts. At first sight, this criterion sounds like a requirement for generalisability, but I interpret it as a requirement that I, as the researcher and author, should present my findings in such a way that the reader is able to fully understand both the findings themselves and the context from which those findings have been drawn, and to draw their own conclusions about the meaning that these findings might have in other contexts including their own. I hope and believe that I have succeeded in meeting this criterion.

In conclusion, my reflection through the lens of the authenticity criteria is that I am confident that the research can stand up to scrutiny against that set of criteria, which is what I set out to achieve; and that the experience of learning about this type of methodology and the criteria by which it can be designed and judged has truly been a fulfilling voyage of discovery.

Suggestions for further research

I believe that this research study has made a valuable contribution to knowledge, and in that sense it has provided some answers. However, predictably, it has also identified a number of questions that will require further research before they can be answered. Research that addressed the following points would be making further valuable contributions to the body of knowledge:

- This study has identified a number of contingent factors which may have influenced the role of diagnostic benchmarking in the context of Organisation C. Further research is needed to confirm whether and how these contingent factors operate; whether they are relevant in the context of other organisations and other circumstances; and their implications for the potential and actual roles that diagnostic benchmarking can fulfill.
- These contingent factors are identified as:
 - ❖ senior management commitment to a quality-focused philosophy
 - ❖ quality maturity
 - ❖ the commitment and enthusiasm of a small number of individuals, or “champions”
 - ❖ orientation towards external scrutiny
 - ❖ established orientation towards (or “culture of”) improvement

The role of diagnostic benchmarking may be different, or may be more or less efficacious, contingent upon the presence, nature or degree of these factors.

- In the context of “the role that is played by a small number of committed, enthusiastic “champions”, this study has suggested that in the context of Organisation C, one of the people who has most influenced developments relating to diagnostic benchmarking has operated in somewhat unconventional roles, and has been described by colleagues as playing the role of a “free spirit” within the

organisation. The importance of this characteristic of the roles of key individuals should be further explored.

- This study has explored a potential link between diagnostic benchmarking and organisational learning, and confirmed that this would be a fruitful area for further research; and for extension into related fields such as knowledge management, change management and the diffusion of innovations.

Summing up

A final reflection is to wonder whether the conclusions I have been able to draw, and the contribution that this research has made, amount to anything more than “just common sense.” An argument could be made that they do contain some elements which might seem quite obvious, albeit that such an analysis may owe something to hindsight and post-rationalisation. Common sense, as we all know, is not always common practice, and a credible definition of good management might be based on “just” applying common sense consistently and intelligently.

To reflect on this issue, I will draw upon the thoughts of two people whose advice and encouragement has been important to me during the time I have been engaged in this research study. Firstly, Steve Unwin who has helped me to understand the power of the “journey” analogy in understanding quality improvement, research, and life in general. A lesson I’ve learned from Steve is the extent to which the journey is often more important than the destination. Without wishing to diminish the importance of reaching conclusions and contributing something substantial, I would reflect that the quality of research is determined at least as much by *how it got there* as by *where it got to*. And bearing in mind Steve’s analogy of the travellers on the road to excellence (Unwin, 2005), I hope that my approach to this study has been closer to that of an explorer than to that of a day-tripper.

And secondly, some words of wisdom from Paul Lee, whose support as my lead supervisor throughout my PhD studies has been invaluable. One of Paul’s other talents is playing that most difficult of roles, the cricket umpire. He informs me that there are 42 laws of cricket, and that during the assessments that umpires must pass they are always asked “Which is the most important law?” The correct answer is “Law 43.” And what is Law 43?:

“Apply common sense.”

APPENDICES

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Appendix A: Programme of supporting studies
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As an important element of my PhD studies, I have completed a substantial programme of supporting studies, which has been particularly helpful in developing my understanding of research philosophy and methodology; and which I have supplemented with extensive literature review on the same topics.

My supporting studies have covered:

(1) research methodology and methods (see Table A.1 below)

(2) a variety of learning events focused on subject matter relevant to the PhD
(see Table A.2 below)

TABLE A.1: Supporting studies completed during the PhD programme: research methodology, methods and skills

Completed 3 units from Northumbria's MSc in Social Research (unassessed) during 1999-2000:

- ☐ Qualitative methods
- ☐ Quantitative methods
- ☐ Research philosophies and issues

Completed NBS prototype "Introduction to research" unit, during semester 1 of 2000/2001

"Information retrieval" seminar for Postgraduate Research students & supervisors ~10 October 2001

"Qualitative methods" workshop ~ part of Quantitative and Qualitative Methods unit of the Northumbria University DBA ~ 23 October 2001

"Increase your personal effectiveness – the Learnfast programme", NHS Northern and Yorkshire Learning Alliance ~ 5 November 2001

"Qualitative methods" workshop ~ part of Quantitative and Qualitative Methods unit of the Northumbria University DBA ~ January 2003.

Completion of Training Needs Analysis for Postgraduate Research students ~ October 2003

Northumbria University: Research students' training programme: 2-hour workshop "Completing a PhD - preparing for the oral exam" ~ 1 December 2003 (Dr. Colin Chandler and Prof. Mary Mellor)

"Disseminating research results" ~ Northumbria University, staff research training programme ~ Veronica Swallow ~ 14 January 2003

Ethics and Governance Issues (update) ~17 March 2004 ~ Dr. Ann Crosland SHCES

Informed Consent (update) ~ 24 March 2004 ~ Dr. Colin Chandler ~ SHCES

Presentations

I have made several presentations of my PhD research as "work in progress":

- ☐ "Does benchmarking work?" NBS School PG Research conference ~ June 2002.
 - ☐ "To determine the extent to which 'diagnostic benchmarking' can be effective as an enabler of organisational improvement" NBS School PG Research conference ~ 17 June 2003.
 - ☐ "The effectiveness of diagnostic benchmarking as an enabler of organisational improvement" NBS School PG Research conference ~ 15 & 16 June 2004.
 - ☐ "The best of both worlds?: combining qualitative and quantitative research methods for new insights into 'Best Practice' and 'Benchmarking'" Bradford University, European Centre for TQM, Doctoral Seminar, 1 June 2005.
 - ☐ "The best of both worlds?: combining qualitative and quantitative research methods for new insights into 'Best Practice' and 'Benchmarking'" NBS School PG Research conference ~ 14 & 15 June 2005.
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TABLE A.2: Supporting studies completed during the PhD programme: learning events covering subject matter relevant to the PhD

<p>EFQM Excellence Model Assessor course "Introduction to the new model" Feb 22 2000; and EFQM Assessment refresher training (June 2000 & 2001, Excellence North East) 5th World Congress for Total Quality Management, Sheffield, July 2000 (presented a paper) Conference "New Directions in Organisational Performance", March 2001, Northumbria Uni. Trained as a beta (Business Excellence Through Action) Assessor, July 2001 Chief Executives' Masterclass on Organisational Excellence organised by the NHS Northern and Yorkshire Learning Alliance (NYLA), June 2001</p> <p>NYLA 1-day seminars: Accelerating the Spread of Good Practice, July 2001; Patient process redesign, 19 Sept. 2001; Applying complexity science to deliver improvement, 4 Oct. 2001; Primer in improvement methodologies, 5 Oct 2001; Change management, 24 Oct. 2001; Applying systems thinking to deliver improvement, 13 Nov. 2001; Theory of Constraints, 17-18 Sept. 2002</p> <p>North East Quality Group annual seminar: "Performance Management", 27 February 2003 Masterclass: "Theory of Constraints" with Eli Goldratt: QE2 Conf. Centre, London, 27 March 2003 Masterclass: "Communities of practice in health and social care" with Etienne Wenger. Kensington Town Hall, London, 12 September 2003</p> <p>8th World Congress for Total Quality Management, Dubai, October 2003 (presented a paper) "The Tipping Point" Accredited Facilitator Training, Durham, North Carolina. Sept. 2004 Learning Alliance workshop "Communities of Practice." Barnsley, 28 Sept 2004 NHS "Leading Modernisation Programme" Learning Event. York, 13-14 October 2004 NHS Learning Set "Working with Change". Sheffield, 28 October 2004. Learning Alliance programme. "Networks". Whiston, 2 Dec. 2004; 26 Jan. 2005 Centre for Competitiveness breakfast seminar: "Benchmarking". Belfast, 20 April 2005 Learning Alliance Shared Learning Day. "Psychodynamics." 21 Dec. 2005</p> <p><u>Presentations</u> I have made several presentations and organised events on themes which form part of my PhD research. These have provided opportunities to test and debate ideas with some interested and well-informed audiences, and hence have helped to shape those ideas:</p> <p>Presentation "Learning Excellence" to Learning & Skills Council Strategic Planning conferences ~ Leeds (13 February); London (26 February); Solihull (4 March 2003)</p> <p>"Next steps". Next Generation Diagnostic Benchmarking workshop, Churchill College, Cambridge, 3 - 4 Sept 2003</p> <p>"Progression pathway". Next Generation Diagnostic Benchmarking workshop, London Business School / AIM, 22 Oct 2003</p> <p>I have organised and chaired two "North East Quality Group" events:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ "Your journey to Excellence", by Steve Unwin, Director of Access to Excellence ~ 22 May 2002 ❖ "Spreading good practice": speakers Maxine Conner, Director of The Learning Alliance; Cameron Ross, Director of the North East Regional Centre for Manufacturing Excellence; Alan Beel, Business Excellence Manager, Warner Electric ~ 12 June 2003.
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